

# ONE

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## Borderlines

Suspended above the courtyard of the Pompidou Center in Paris is the Génitron, an electric sign-clock flashing the number of seconds left in the twentieth century. Inaugurated in January 1987 by François Mitterrand, the Génitron is a time machine that conducts its relentless countdown over the heads of the milling international fauna of les Halles, the hustlers, punks, dealers, con men, mystics, musicians, strongmen, fire-eaters, rappers, breakers, addicts, sidewalk artists, and sidewalk dwellers who seem already to represent the specters of the apocalypse. As the novelist Angela Carter observes, "the *fin* is coming a little early this *siècle*."

The Génitron makes spectators uncomfortable, for the terminal decades of a century suggest to many minds the death throes of a diseased society and the winding down of an exhausted culture. In his gloomy and embittered treatise on *Degeneration* (1892), the Austrian Max Nordau proclaimed that "in our days there have arisen in more highly developed minds vague qualms of a Dusk of the Nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world."<sup>1</sup> From urban homelessness to imperial decline, from sexual revolution to sexual epidemics, the last decades of the twentieth century seem to be repeating the problems, themes, and metaphors of the *fin de siècle*. Latter-day Nordaus like Allan Bloom, William Bennett, or John Silber preach against a new American Dusk, in which the breakdown of the family; the decline of religion; the women's liberation and gay rights movements; the drug epidemic; and the

redefinition of the humanities merge to signal a waning culture. For some years already we have become accustomed to the electric signs of apocalypse, or rather those troubling signals of "Apocalypse From Now On," as Susan Sontag puts it, that seem characteristic of late-twentieth-century life—dire predictions of disasters that never exactly happen, or perhaps have invisibly happened already—the greenhouse effect, the stock market crash, the nuclear threat, AIDS, terrorism, crime, urban decay, crack.<sup>2</sup> After post-industrialism, post-modernism, post-feminism, and post-historicism, we now hear that the end of the century means the end of art, the end of nature, or the end of history.<sup>3</sup>

The ends of centuries seem not only to suggest but to intensify crises, as the 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution and the astonishing events in Eastern Europe reminded us. History warns that after the revolution comes the terror and decadence. When the term *fin-de-siècle* originated in France in the 1880s to define this state of mind, it spread rapidly throughout Europe and the United States; "the word," wrote Nordau, "has flown from one hemisphere to the other, and found its way into all civilized languages."<sup>4</sup> (The term being currently proposed for late-twentieth-century culture is "endism.")<sup>5</sup> But why should the ends of centuries have special meanings and feelings or manifest common patterns? After all, the century markers are only imaginary borderlines in time; there is even disagreement as to when—December 31, '99? December 31, '00?—the new century begins. As Thomas Mann wrote in "The Magic Kingdom," "Time has no divisions to mark its passage. There is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins, it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols."

Could there be cycles in time like cycles in the weather, like hurricanes and earthquakes, which are chaotic but not random? In a famous book, *Frank Kermode* argued that "the sense of an ending" is a myth of the temporal that affects our thought about ourselves, our histories, our disciplines, and our fictions: "We project our existential anxieties on to history; there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the peculiarity of our imagination, that it chooses always to be at the end of an era."<sup>6</sup> The crises of the *fin de siècle*, then, are more intensely experienced, more emotionally fraught, more weighted with symbolic and historical meaning, because we invest them with the metaphors of death and rebirth that we project onto the final decades and years of a century. Myths and metaphors cannot

be separated from our historical understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* experience, for they are part of it, not merely decorative flourishes in an objective historical description, but constitutive of the experiences themselves.

This book is about the myths, metaphors, and images of sexual crises and apocalypse that marked both the late nineteenth century and our own *fin de siècle*, and its representations in English and American literature, art, and film. The 1880s and 1890s, in the words of the novelist George Gissing, were decades of "sexual anarchy," when all the laws that governed sexual identity and behavior seemed to be breaking down. As Karl Miller notes, "Men became women. Women became men. Gender and country were put in doubt. The single life was found to harbour two sexes and two nations."<sup>7</sup> During this period both the words "feminism" and "homosexuality" first came into use, as New Women and male aesthetes redefined the meanings of femininity and masculinity. There were fears that emancipated women would bear children outside of marriage in the free union, or worse, that they would not have children at all. In the wake of Ibsen, women's oppression became the theme of successful plays by Arthur Pinero, Oscar Wilde, Harley Granville-Barker, and George Bernard Shaw, and novels by Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, and George Moore.

The *fin de siècle* was also a period of sexual scandals. In England, they ranged from the trial and acquittal of the notorious brothel-keeper Jeffries in 1884, and the sensational journalistic series on child prostitution of W. T. Stead, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," in 1885, to the exposé of the Cleveland Street male brothel in 1889. All of these scandals changed the level of public awareness about sexuality and engendered a fierce response in social purity campaigns, a renewed sense of public moral concern, and demands, often successful, for restrictive legislation and censorship. They were occasions when gender roles were "publicly, even spectacularly, encoded and enforced."<sup>8</sup> Especially there was a call to reaffirm the importance of the family as the bulwark against sexual decadence. "In all countries the purity of the family must be the surest strength of a nation," wrote the Reverend W. Arthur in 1885.<sup>9</sup> The emergence and medicalization of the modern homosexual identity in the 1880s reached widespread public attention with Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction in 1895. Indeed, many Englishmen regarded the homosexual scandals of the 1880s and 1890s, up to Oscar Wilde's trial, as certain signs of the immorality that had toppled Greece and Rome. "If England falls,"

one clergyman warned, "it will be this sin, and her unbelief in God, that will have been her ruin."<sup>10</sup> A public furor over prostitution and the sexual epidemic of syphilis changed the discourse of sexuality, the body, and disease.

In the late twentieth century, too, threats of sexual anarchy have generated panic and backlash against the sexual liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Concerns about the sexual abuse of children and the increasing frequency of occurrences of rape have focused on censoring art and banning pornography rather than on examining the social construction of male sexual violence. Fears about the drastic changes in women's sexual choices have taken the form of anti-abortion campaigns rather than plans for child support, parenting leaves, or daycare. Anxiety about women's educational and economic advances and the effects of women's paid labor on traditional marital structures have led to a renewed idealization of the family, domesticity, and maternity. The AIDS epidemic has fueled homophobia and an emphasis on monogamy and celibacy rather than a commitment to sex education and information about safer sexual practices.

These responses are also typical of the *fin de siècle*. In periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense. If the different races can be kept in their places, if the various classes can be held in their proper districts of the city, and if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless specter of millennial change.

Sexual difference was only one of the threatened borders of the *fin de siècle*, and sexuality only one of the areas in which anarchy seemed imminent. The 1880s were a turbulent decade in English history. The making of vast industrial fortunes was balanced by the organization of trade unions and the founding of the British Labour party. Imperialist adventure in Africa, where diamonds were discovered in the Transvaal in 1880, occurred while urban poverty and homelessness in England received dramatic attention. Hopes for the Empire were undermined by acts of political terrorism committed by anarchists and Irish nationalists. Even while the age of imperialism was at its height, there were also fears of degeneration and collapse. England was often compared to decadent Greece and Rome, and there were parallel fears of the rise of captive peoples.

Racial boundaries were among the most important lines of demarcation for English society; fears not only of colonial rebellion but also of racial mingling, crossbreeding, and intermarriage, fueled scientific and political interest in establishing clear lines of demarcation between black and white, East and West. After General Gordon's defeat by an Islamic fundamentalist, the Mahdi, at Khartoum in 1885, many saw signs that the Empire was being undermined by racial degeneration and the rebellion of the "lower" races. Late Victorian science, especially the new science of physical anthropology, devoted itself to establishing the legitimacy of racial differentiation and hierarchy, and to demonstrating the "degenerations that threatened when these boundaries were transgressed."<sup>11</sup>

There was a major crisis in class relations as well. At the end of the 1870s, England and Western Europe in general were hit by an economic depression, and in the 1880s the term "unemployment" first came into use. In the inner city lived the "residuum" of the chronically poor and hard-core unemployed. This netherworld was seen to live in slums, breeding disease, ignorance, madness, and crime, problems some eugenicists felt were so intractable that the poor should not be allowed to reproduce. The theory of urban degeneration furthermore held that poverty led to a general deterioration of the race. "Everywhere no doubt," wrote H. M. Hyndman in his essay "English Workers as They Are" (1887), "there is a certain percentage who are almost beyond hope of being reached at all. Crushed down into the gutter, physically and mentally by their social surroundings, they can but die out, leaving, it is hoped, no progeny as a burden on a better state of things."<sup>12</sup>

Metaphors of race were also used to describe class relationships. While other races seemed distant and exotic, the working class was close at hand. William Booth's *In Darkest England* (1890) and Margaret Harkness's novel *In Darkest London* (1891) drew parallels between the problems of the African jungle and the urban jungle where homelessness, poverty, hunger, drunkenness, and sexual barbarity could be seen every day. In an eloquent comparison of Stanley's vast African forest, with its pygmies, traders, and cannibals, to the labyrinth of London, with its stunted people and its predators, Booth, the leader of the Salvation Army, asked: "As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of

our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest? . . . The ivory raiders who brutally traffic in the unfortunate denizens of the forest glades, what are they but the publicans who flourish on the weakness of our poor? . . . As in Africa it is all trees, trees, trees with no other world conceivable, so is it here—it is all vice and poverty and crime."<sup>13</sup> Everything that was "dark, labyrinthine, threatening, and benighted," Deborah Nord notes, could be located in "the East—whether Burma, India, or the East End of London."<sup>14</sup> Thus Conrad, among others, draws significant parallels between the Thames and the Congo, between the heart of darkness and an England which has also "been one of the dark places of the world."

While for most of the nineteenth century the urban boundaries between the classes were clearly demarcated, with the poor restricted to working-class districts of the East End, urban homelessness and general unemployment made the borderline between the classes startlingly visible. In London, by 1887, the homeless had taken to camping out in Trafalgar Square and St. James's Park, arousing both compassion and fear. As the social scientist Charles Booth explained, "This state of things attracted attention. The newspapers published accounts of it, and public imagination was aroused. Here at any rate was genuine distress. Some charitable agencies distributed tickets for food or lodging, others the food itself, taking cart-loads of food into the Square."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, many shopkeepers felt threatened by the influx of homeless and indigent, who scared customers away. They demanded that the police deal with the situation and threatened that they would otherwise hire their own guards to clear the streets.<sup>16</sup> The pressure resulted in a violent clash on "Bloody Sunday" in November 1887, as police cleared the squares and park. This netherworld of darkest England thus presented the perpetual threat of class revolution; any minute, it was feared, workers might rise up in revolt.

While the "lower races" were safely distant in Africa and India, and the poor usually well out of sight, men could not hide in the same way from the threat of a revolution by women. The crisis in race and class relations in the 1880s had a parallel in the crisis in gender. "That both women and 'natives' simultaneously began to manifest frightening drives toward independence just as England's great century of empire drew to its uneasy close," Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, "would, of course, have sealed the *fin-de-siècle* connection between these two previously silent and disenfranchised groups."<sup>17</sup> And many

Victorians, such as Karl Pearson, saw "two great problems of modern social life" as "the problem of women and the problem of labour."<sup>18</sup> Feminism, the women's movement, and what was called "the Woman Question" challenged the traditional institutions of marriage, work, and the family. In the 1880s, moreover, feminist reform legislation, as Peter Gay notes, "began to dismantle England's time-honored patriarchal system."<sup>19</sup> A series of legislative acts materially improved women's legal status: the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 and the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1886. In France, too, women's right to divorce was reestablished in 1884. Women also challenged the system of higher education, and their efforts to gain admission to university lectures at Oxford and Cambridge were met with strong opposition. The Oxford Union voted overwhelmingly against admitting women to the B.A. degree in 1896, and there were riots at Cambridge in opposition to women's admission. The different political interests of men and women created a severe strain in relations between the sexes. "To many late nineteenth and early twentieth century men," Gilbert and Gubar observe, "women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish, while to women in those years men appeared as aggrieved defenders of an indefensible order."<sup>20</sup>

The resistance to feminist initiatives made it seem as if a female takeover were imminent. In fact, however, the *fin-de-siècle* rhetoric of invasion was out of proportion to the reality. For most of the period, the English suffrage movement was in what Lady Frances Balfour called "the doldrum years." In 1884, suffragists had hopes that the Reform Bill would include a women's amendment; more than 40 percent of the M.P.s elected in 1880 were pledged to support it. But Gladstone opposed the amendment, and carried the Liberal Party with him. After the amendment's defeat, women's suffrage was more or less a dead issue until the beginnings of militancy in 1905. Women were certainly no economic threat either. Overall, women in the workforce earned only 50 percent of what men earned, and only 8 percent of trade union membership was female. And the universities were far from feminized. By 1897, there were only 844 women in all the English universities put together; in England there were only 87 women doctors, in France, 95.

Why then were these few privileged and exceptional women so alarming for men to contemplate? As the political historian Carole Pateman has observed, women have traditionally been perceived as

figures of disorder, "potential disrupters of masculine boundary systems of all sorts."<sup>21</sup> Women's social or cultural marginality seems to place them on the borderlines of the symbolic order, both the "frontier between men and chaos," and dangerously part of chaos itself, inhabitants of a mysterious and frightening wild zone outside of patriarchal culture.<sup>22</sup>

But the process of upheaval, the redefinition of gender that took place at the turn of the century, was not limited to women. Gender crisis affected men as well as women, and the fantasies of a pitched battle for sexual supremacy typical of the period often concealed deeper uncertainties and contradictions on both sides. It is important to keep in mind that masculinity is no more natural, transparent, and unproblematic than "femininity." It, too, is a socially constructed role, defined within particular cultural and historical circumstances, and the *fin de siècle* also marked a crisis of identity for men. The nineteenth century had cherished a belief in the separate spheres of femininity and masculinity that amounted almost to religious faith. In revolutionary periods, the fear of social and political equality between the sexes has always generated strenuous counter-efforts to shore up borderlines by establishing scientific proof for the absolute mental and physical differences between men and women. As the historian Thomas Laqueur comments with relation to the French Revolution, "wherever boundaries were threatened arguments for fundamental sexual differences were shoved into the breach."<sup>23</sup> Thus by the *fin de siècle*, a post-Darwinian "sexual science" offered expert testimony on the evolutionary differences between men and women. While women's "nurturant domestic capabilities fitted them for home and hearth," . . . men had evolved aggressive, competitive abilities "that fitted them for public life."<sup>24</sup> The sexual borderline between the masculine and the feminine represented the dangerous vanishing point of sexual difference. As Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula*, wrote, "the ideal man is entirely or almost entirely masculine and the ideal woman is entirely or almost entirely feminine. Each individual must have a preponderance, be it ever so little, of the cells of its own sex, and the attraction of each individual to the other sex depends upon its place on the scale between the highest and lowest grade of sex. The most masculine man draws the most feminine woman, and vice versa; and so down the scale till close to the borderline in the great mass of persons, who, having only developed a few of the qualities of sex, are easily satisfied to mate with anyone."<sup>25</sup>

Yet many men found their part of the equation as difficult to sustain as women did theirs, and the source of as much anxiety. Opportunities to succeed at home and in the Empire were not always abundant; the stresses of maintaining an external mask of confidence and strength led to nervous disorders, such as neurasthenia; suppressing "feminine" feelings of nurturance and affection created problems for many men as well. What was most alarming to the *fin de siècle* was that sexuality and sex roles might no longer be contained within the neat and permanent borderlines of gender categories. Men and women were not as clearly identified and separated as they had been, as *Punch* lamented in April 1895: "A new fear my bosom vexes; / Tomorrow there may be no sexes!" Havelock Ellis confirmed this anxiety when he wrote in *The Psychology of Sex* that although "we may not know exactly what sex is, . . . we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often mutable, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female."<sup>26</sup> Where, men asked themselves, were they placed on the scale of masculinity? Were they dangerously close to the borderline?

Thus while many critics and historians have described this period as a battle *between* the sexes, a period of sexual antagonism that came from male resentment of women's emancipation, I would argue that it was also a battle *within* the sexes. Men, too, faced changes in their lives and sexual identities. In England, there was "a crisis in the 1890s of the male on all levels—economic, political, social, psychological, as producer, as power, as role, as lover."<sup>27</sup> In France, where the feminist movement had been active since the 1890s, "at the advent of the twentieth century, fear of women's sexual and economic liberation or perhaps an imaginary fear—gave rise to renewed antifeminism, expressed as a masculinity crisis . . . The crisis of masculinity marked an awakening consciousness of what it meant to be a man. In the context of developing individualism, men become aware of their sexual difference, their physical and moral specificity."<sup>28</sup> In the United States, Michael Kimmel argues, there was a crisis in masculinity after the Civil War which took three forms: an anti-feminist backlash, a movement for male supremacy, and male feminism; and these modes of response can also be seen in other national settings.<sup>29</sup>

Opposition to the women's movement in an attempt to preserve traditional definitions of sex roles was an obvious reaction. In England and the United States, men organized antisuffrage groups, often with

ladies' auxiliaries. Some went much further and blamed rebellious women and female emancipation for the decline and fall of the Western world. In France, anti-feminist literature by such writers as Georges Donen, Emile Zola, Albert Cim, and Maurice Barrès linked what was seen as the insidious power of New Women with social degeneracy.<sup>30</sup> Fin-de-siècle misogyny was most dramatically and vividly apparent in painting. There images of female narcissism, of the femme fatale and the sphinx, of women kissing their mirror images, gazing at themselves in circular baths, or engaging in autoerotic play mutate by the end of the century into savagely "gynecidal" visions of female sexuality. These images of women are part of the pattern Bram Dijkstra has called "idols of perversity."<sup>31</sup> In Ludwig von Hofmann's *The Valley of Innocence* (1897), for example, a huge adolescent girl plays with the naked body of a toylike man. Beside her is a knife and a pile of decapitated male bodies, while a parade of other tiny men wait their turn for the massacre. Among the most famous images of the period are Gustave Klimt's gilded, predatory women. The popularity of exhibits of art from fin-de-siècle Vienna and the revival of Art Nouveau in the last decade suggest the continuing fascination with the figure of the sexually voracious femme fatale, which has entered popular culture as well; in the opening scenes of Rodney Dangerfield's hit film *Back to School* (1986), the pop-eyed hero walks into a lavish party in his own home and surprises his arty, gold-digging wife in the arms of another man. "Excuse me," the interrupted lover haughtily remarks, "Your wife was just showing me her Klimt."

While one response to female power was an exaggerated horror of its castrating potential, another response was the intensified valorization of male power, and expressions of anxiety about waning virility. Teddy Roosevelt was one of many fin-de-siècle politicians who connected his imperialist politics with an image of robust masculinity: "There is no place in the world for nations who have become enervated by the soft and easy life, or who have lost their fibre of vigorous hardness and masculinity."<sup>32</sup> In France, the masculinity crisis "found positive expression in the affirmation of virile values, physical, cultural, and moral. We see the development of sports, the praise of athletic figures, the new stadium gods who displayed their beautiful muscular bodies before women spectators."<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Zola lamented the weakening virility of a feminized France.<sup>34</sup> In England, psychiatrists identified a new kind of male neurotic, the "borderliner." Andrew Wynter's popular medical text, *The Borderlands of Insanity*

(1877), described the potential degeneration of borderline men in "Mazeland," "Dazeland," and "Driftland," whose minds felt the lack of "directing" or "controlling power." Freed from the controls of patriarchy, especially from service in the army, and uncertain of their role, Wynter warned, young men from the middle and upper classes would find their minds "first stiffen from disuse and then rot from the decay of a vitality which is never properly brought into play."<sup>35</sup>

Men in Dazeland and Mazeland might actually welcome the crisis in gender as an escape from their own sexual burdens. Another way of understanding the crisis is to see it as generated from within and reflecting stresses and tensions in the rigid construction of masculine roles. By the 1890s, indeed, the system of patriarchy was under attack not only by women, but also by an avant-garde of male artists, sexual radicals, and intellectuals, who challenged its class structures and roles, its system of inheritance and primogeniture, its compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and its cultural authority. Others, primarily educators, social reformers, and sexual libertarians, identified themselves as male feminists, seeing the women's movement as an answer to their own problems. The French novelists (scornfully called the "vaginards"), such as Villiers de L'Isle Adam in *L'Eve future* (1888) and Jules Dubois in *L'Eve nouvelle* (1896), heralded the new age of women.

But the male rebellion against patriarchy did not necessarily mean a commitment to feminism. While the male avant-garde of the 1880s "were critical of the patriarchal order in which they lived and heralded its end," they often "looked with fear towards the new feminist order."<sup>36</sup> This paradox is at the heart of fin-de-siècle culture. Indeed, strongly anti-patriarchal sentiments could also coexist comfortably with misogyny, homophobia, and racism.

A significant aspect of the construction of masculinity was the institution of "Clubland," the network of men's clubs which served all social classes and provided alternatives and substitutes for domestic life. Clubland reinforced the spatial as well as the social boundaries separating men and women. As the historian Brian Harrison explains, "this was an age of bachelors, or of married men who spent a large part of their lives as if they were bachelors: the London clubs—recruited from a number of ancillary male institutions in the public schools, Oxford and Cambridge colleges and professional institutions—catered amply for their needs."<sup>37</sup> In England, the clubs were primarily extensions of the male communities of the public schools

and universities. Peter Gay points out that "leading anti-feminists lived in . . . the privileged enclaves of men's colleges, men's holidays, men's professional brotherhoods, all symbolized and perpetuated in men's clubs, and they found it painful to contemplate their boyish world being invaded by the females whom their favorite institutions had deliberately, so far successfully, excluded."<sup>38</sup>

Clubland operated as a lifetime training ground for men wishing to exclude women. Aggressively and urbanely heterosexual, even rakish, in their discourse, the clubs were the stronghold and headquarters of opposition to women's suffrage and practiced an "intermittent and localised misogyny."<sup>39</sup> A boy accustomed to intense male friendships and anti-feminist assumptions in the atmosphere of the public schools was "fully equipped to play his part in keeping women out" when he reached the university; and "the Oxford college was itself a small club" where the social and intellectual habits of public school could be continued. The London gentleman could spend his entire life moving through "a maze of clubs," athletic, political, and social; and professions from medicine and the law to "the best club of all—the House of Commons," also imitated the structure of Clubland.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the exclusion of women was not restricted to the upper and middle classes. Women were generally not permitted in public houses, and in 1897 only one of the 512 groups in the Working Men's Clubs and Institute Union admitted women as members.<sup>41</sup>

A few male feminists protested against the world of the clubs. In the spring of 1879, Ibsen proposed that women be allowed to vote in the meetings of the Scandinavian Club in Rome, where he was living. In his speech on the proposal, Ibsen derided male fears of women's participation: "Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture, or intelligence, or knowledge, or artistic talent? I don't think many men would dare suggest that. Then what is it men fear? I hear there is a tradition here that women are cunning intriguers, and that therefore we don't want them. Well, I have encountered a good deal of male intrigue in my time . . ."<sup>42</sup> He was voted down.

Literacy and professional women, too, were concerned about their access to the male club world. During the 1880s, a number of women's professional clubs were formed, including the feminist Pioneer Club, which mixed the social classes and sponsored lectures on literature and politics. The Club became sufficiently controversial to attract the

*Punch* parodists; in November 1894, *Punch* cleverly adapted Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" to satirize "literary dames" chanting:

We primeval fetters loosing,  
We our husbands taming, vexing we and worrying Mrs. GRUNDY  
We our own lives freely living, we as bachelor-girls residing,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!<sup>43</sup>

Some women sought admission to the male clubs. In her essay "Women and Club Life," the poet Amy Levy observed that "not long ago, indeed, a motion was brought forward for the admission of women to the Savile Club. Its rejection must be a matter of regret to all women engaged in literature and education; but the fact that such a motion was brought forward and considered is of itself significant."<sup>44</sup> She was optimistic that women would be admitted before very long. A full century later, however, women were still fighting in the courts for admission to the male sanctuaries of Clubland, from the Athenaeum in London to the Century Club in New York, the Bohemian Grove in Washington, the Ethan Allen Club in Vermont, and the Ivy Club at Princeton University. In 1983, Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, insisted on the need to maintain distinct and permanent boundaries between the genders, in this case by excluding women from the Century Club: "The clarity of gender makes possible the human dialectic. Let the lines of balanced tension go slack and the structure dissolves into the ooze of androgyny and narcissism."<sup>45</sup>

But Clubland could not really separate the messy "ooze of androgyny" from the "clarity of gender." Fin-de-siècle Clubland existed on the fragile borderline that separated male bonding from homosexuality, and that distinguished manly misogyny from disgusting homoeroticism. "The fears of clubland," Peter Gay observed, ". . . were fears not of being castrated but of being compelled to grow up; of having to abandon persistent adolescent ties with their distinctly, though largely unconscious, homoerotic pleasures."<sup>46</sup> In Caryl Churchill's contemporary play *Cloud 9*, set in Africa in 1880, Clive tells his friend Harry, "There is something dark about women that threatens what is best in us. Between men the light burns brightly." But when Harry responds by embracing him, Clive is disgusted: "The most revolting perversion. Rome fell, Harry, and this sin can destroy an empire." The light that burned brightly between men could also be the sin that destroys an



empire. In her important book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Sedgwick pointed to the double bind of masculine identity that structures the spectrum of relationships between men. "For a man to be a man's man," Sedgwick noted, "is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men.'" <sup>47</sup>

Following the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, many historians of sexuality now argue that male homosexuality and the male homosexual role are "inventions" of the late nineteenth century. The concept of homosexuality began to take shape in the 1880s in the work of John Addington Symonds and Richard von Krafft-Ebing and in the research of Victorian sexologists such as Havelock Ellis. As Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy, and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality." <sup>48</sup> Homosexuality became a medical problem, a pathology, even a disease; and medical and scientific speculations about homosexuality attempted to establish clear borderlines and labels, to draw "an impassable border between acceptable and abhorrent behaviour." <sup>49</sup>

The effort to create boundaries around male homosexuality was also carried out in the legal sphere. The burgeoning homosexual subculture that had begun to develop in England in the 1870s and early 1880s was both identified and outlawed by the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made all male homosexual acts, private or public, illegal: "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to, the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour." This was the law under which Oscar Wilde would be convicted and sentenced to two years of hard labor at Reading Gaol.

Nevertheless, fin-de-siècle efforts to define and control homosexuality, and to bound it off from masculinity in general, were not successful, and may have had the effect of strengthening homosexual bonds. As Jeffrey Weeks explained, "it seems likely that new forms of legal regulation, whatever their vagaries in application, had the

effect of bringing home to many the fact of their difference and thus creating a new community of knowledge, if not of life and feeling, amongst many men with homosexual leanings." <sup>50</sup> Foucault maintained that this paradoxical effect is inevitable because the official definition, marginalization, and control of a particular group such as homosexuals always creates a "reverse discourse," an identity around which a subculture might begin to form and to protest. Thus, once homosexuality had been singled out in the late nineteenth century, "it begins to speak on its own behalf, to forge its own identity and culture, often in the self-same terms by which it had been produced and marginalised, and eventually to challenge the very power structure which had produced and marginalised it." <sup>51</sup> The record of this culture emerges in the "decadent" art and literature of the *fin de siècle*.

While this book is largely a history of sexual change in the late nineteenth century, it is thus also a study of late-nineteenth-century literature. The two go together; for, as Nancy Armstrong observes, "the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality," <sup>52</sup> and the history of sexuality is also constructed in the pages of fiction. Turn-of-the-century characters have become part of our cultural mythology. From the moments of their creation, Sherlock Holmes, Jekyll and Hyde, Dracula, Dorian Gray, the Time Traveller, and Mr. Kurtz leapt out of the pages of their books into popular culture. We know them whether or not we have read the books in which they first appeared. Like Dracula, they are the undead of the *fin de siècle*, legendary creations who never stay at rest and whose myths have been rewritten and revisioned in our own time.

Moreover, one of the most dramatic changes at the *fin de siècle* was the transformation of the publishing world and the way literary myths were disseminated to readers. In his history of the profession of authorship in the nineteenth century, Nigel Cross pointed out that between 1880 and 1895 the publishing world saw such changes as the introduction of syndication, the founding of the Society of Authors [1884], the rise of the literary agent, and the proliferation of magazines and the popular press. <sup>53</sup> Another major change was the disappearance of the Victorian three-volume novel, which had been designed for family readership and had been a staple of the Victorian home. Three-volume novels were priced artificially high—the standard price was thirty-one shillings sixpence, or about forty dollars in contemporary terms—so that most middle-class readers could not afford to buy them. The triple decker was maintained by "a cartel of publishers and cir-



culating libraries who depended on its high price for their stable profit margins."<sup>54</sup> A large circulating library such as Mudies or Smiths could buy up virtually the entire run of a novel, thus guaranteeing the publisher and the author an income. Three-volume novels were also handy to distribute. A poor subscriber could pay a fee entitling him or her to take out only one volume at a time; in a family, father could begin to read volume one, and pass the volumes around the family through wife and daughters as he finished.

Since they were designed for family circulation, Victorian novels were obliged to be respectable and chaste, and several male English novelists in the 1880s protested against the three-volume form as an aesthetic straitjacket. In a controversial essay of 1885 called "Literature at Nurse," George Moore protested against the censorship, decorum, and restraint on the novelist's art imposed by the dictatorship of the libraries and family readership. But the death of the three-decker was primarily economic and followed a decision by the lending libraries themselves in 1894. From 193 triple-decker novels published in 1884, the number dropped to merely four by 1897. Novelists rejoiced at the demise of a genre that had constrained and inhibited them. "It is fine to see how the old three-volume tradition is being broken through," wrote George Gissing in 1885; "one volume is becoming commonest of all. It is the new school, due to continental influence. Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length . . . their plan is to tell everything and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is the latter method of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies."<sup>55</sup>

Just as they were designed for family reading and public circulation, the volumes in their stout bindings were themselves physically associated with the Victorian nuclear family: father, mother, and child. But the slim, exquisitely bound novels of the *fin de siècle*, with their gilded covers and Beardsley designs, suggested a very different image of character and sexuality: the celibate, the bachelor, the "odd woman," the dandy, and the aesthete. New sexual and fictional combinations characterized the narrative milieu of the 1880s, as Rhoda Broughton noted in eyeing "the brand-new books . . . in threes, in twos, in ones."<sup>56</sup> Unsuitable for family consumption, these books were more likely to be read alone and perhaps even under the covers. Sex and the single book became the order of the day.

Another dramatic change in the English novel was the striking, although temporary, eclipse of women writers. It was a fact of mid-

Victorian literary life that women novelists were both talented and successful. Novels, wrote the critic W. R. Greg, were "almost as indispensable a portion of the food of English life as beef or beer; and no producers are superior to women in this line either as to delicate handling or abundant fertility."<sup>57</sup> But after 1880, women novelists, while ever more numerous in the marketplace, entered a period of critical decline. After George Eliot's death in 1880, male professional jealousies erupted in critical abuse of women's emasculating effect on the English novel. While Havelock Ellis could still praise Hardy in 1883 by comparing him to Eliot, since, as Ellis observed, "it seems now to stand beyond question that the most serious work in English fiction . . . has been done by women," a decade later such comparisons were odious.<sup>58</sup> By the 1890s, women novelists were viewed as shriveled prudes whose influence hindered a virile masculine genre. In her study of feminism and fiction at the turn of the century, Patricia Stubbs lamented that "at the very moment when literature was beginning to break free from the moral stranglehold of Victorian sexual ideology, the novel was dominated for the first time and quite accidentally by male writers."<sup>59</sup>

One of the questions I ask in this book is whether this domination was indeed accidental. Could it have been that after a century in which English women had shaped the novel, there was a twenty-year period in which no talented women appeared? Or was the male domination of the novel after 1880 an aspect of the crisis in masculinity that intensified sexual struggle? The answers begin with the funeral of George Eliot in 1880 and with the reaction by both women and men against female dominance and the Victorian novel. The scriptures of sexual difference had been part of the infrastructure of Victorian fiction, which had "produced a great tradition of narrative controlled by difference, by the discrete separation of subject and object, public and private, active and passive—categories intimately linked to the radical dualism of masculine and feminine."<sup>60</sup>

George Eliot's novels were the finest example of this narrative form. But when sexual certainties broke down, fictional certainties changed as well. The disappearance of the three-decker suggested a movement away from subjects, themes, and forms associated with femininity and maternity. In describing a popular Victorian woman novelist, for example, Henry James saw her books as "a little family, in sets of triplets."<sup>61</sup> The three-part structure dictated a vision of human experience as linear, progressive, causal, and tripartite, ending in marriage or

death. When there were no longer three volumes to fill, writers could abandon the temporal structures of beginning, middle, and end, and the procreative and genealogical fables of inheritance, marriage, and death that had been traditionally associated with women writers and Victorian realism. Instead, *fin-de-siècle* narrative questioned beliefs in endings and closures, as well as in marriage and inheritance. As endings opened up, the genre of the fantastic also introduced the theme of split personality at the same time that psychoanalysis was beginning to question the stable and linear Victorian ego. Thus many of the stories of the *fin de siècle* are also case histories which describe deviance, rebellion, and the abnormal. Like Freud's accounts of hysterical patients, they are fragmented, out of chronological sequence, contradictory, and incoherent. Rather than being told by the omniscient narrator of Victorian realism, they are told by multiple narrators, or by characters who reveal their own feelings towards the hero or heroine in the course of telling the tale.

Many of the correspondences between the end of the last century and the end of our own will already have become apparent. The 1980s and 1990s also compulsively tell and retell the stories of the 1880s and 1890s, in contemporary versions of Victorian novels, in film and TV adaptations, in ballets and musicals, and in all the myriad forms of popular culture from Count Chockula breakfast cereal to men's clothes on the label Jekyll and Hyde. Yet in retelling these stories we transmit our own narratives, construct our own case histories, and shape our own futures. In the chapters to follow, I deal with myths, texts, and images rather than issues: the single woman, the New Woman, the battle between literary kings and queens, sexual surgery and sexual epidemics, decadence and the apocalypse. The parallels between the sexual anarchy of the *fin de siècle* and the gender crises of our time are tempting, and it is tempting, too, to fall into despair as we contemplate the erosion of hard-won rights and the perpetuation of hard-fought wrongs in an atmosphere of moral panic. Yet if we can learn something from the fears and myths of the past, it is that they are so often exaggerated and unreal, that what looks like sexual anarchy in the context of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties may be the embryonic stirrings of a new order.

## TWO

### Odd Women

Sexual anarchy began with the odd woman. The odd woman—the woman who could not marry—undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles. Starting with the English census of 1861, a steadily increasing surplus of unmarried women over men had created a sense of national alarm. In a widely read essay in the *Westminster Review* called “Why Are Women Redundant?” the journalist William R. Greg called attention to the “enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which positively and relatively is indicative of an unwholesome social state.”<sup>1</sup> The odd woman was the one left over, the uneven number, the spinster who could not find a husband to pair off with her. The term the *fin de siècle* invented for her gives the sense of both her nonconformity and her commodification. Writing to a friend about his novel *The Odd Women* (1891), George Gissing explained, “the title means ‘Les Femmes Superflues’—the women who are *odd* in the sense that they do not make a match; as we say ‘an odd glove.’”<sup>2</sup>

Odd women were a social problem. Thousands had to earn their own living, rivaling men for employment, Greg pointed out, instead of “spending and husbanding the earnings of men.” Deprived of the “natural duties and labours of wives and mothers,” they had to “carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves;” and overall, instead of fulfilling women's destiny by “completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others,” they were compelled to “lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own.”

*unmarried woman*

Greg's solution to the problem was government-sponsored emigration of single women to the colonies, where English women were a scarce commodity, and where they might therefore find husbands. He opposed the expansion of women's employment opportunities, however, because it might "surround single life . . . with such a pleasant, ornamented, comfortable path" that marriage would be perceived as only one option among many and encourage an unnatural celibacy.

Fin-de-siècle feminists interpreted the statistics of female oddness very differently. They used the surplus of unmarried women to prove that women's traditional domestic roles were outmoded and that social policies which denied them higher education, alternative roles, professional opportunities, and votes were self-defeating and cruel. If women could no longer expect to be supported by husbands, they would have to be educated and trained to support themselves. In an essay called "How to Provide for Superfluous Women" (1869), Jessie Boucherett argued that the best plan was to allow unmarried women "to engage freely in all occupations suited to their strength . . . thus converting them into useful members of society."<sup>1</sup> Feminist reform organizations such as the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, founded in 1859, tried to find new occupational fields for untrained middle-class women—those hardest hit by the demographic change, since their only traditional employments, governessing and teaching, had become professionalized and overcrowded. The Female Employment Society attempted to make office and clerical work, as well as some manual jobs, such as printing, telegraphy, and hairdressing, respectable for middle-class women. Emily Davies and others led the campaign to open the university examinations to women, while Elizabeth Garrett, Sophia Jex-Blake, and Elizabeth Blackwell organized the fight for women's admission to medical schools.

While feminist reformers concerned themselves primarily with middle-class women, they were also aware of the different problems facing working-class women. An investigator of the Select Commission on the Shop Hours Regulation Bill, for example, reported in 1886 that "the majority of shop assistants look upon marriage as their one hope of release, and would, as one girl expressed it, 'marry anybody to get out of the drapery business.'"<sup>2</sup> Feminist reformers' concern for working women manifested itself most dramatically in sympathy for the prostitute who might have been driven to the streets because she had no alternative kind of work.

Why this sudden attention to the single woman? The unmarried

woman was obviously not a new phenomenon, and anxieties about a surplus of single women had emerged in England many times before, especially after wars and in other periods of gender crisis. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, women concerned about a "male shortage" had petitioned Parliament for a tax on all men who remained single after the age of twenty-one. What, then, made the odd women of the *fin de siècle* so conspicuous, troubling, and dramatic?

The answer lies in the period's construction of unmarried women as a new political and sexual group, not just an absence or cipher in the social body, but a constituency with potential opportunities, powers, and rights. First of all, unmarried women, or *femes soles*, were targeted as the initial beneficiaries of the women's suffrage movement. While married women seemed to be excluded from enfranchisement by the common law doctrine of coverture, adult single women, it could be argued, needed to vote since they were legally unrepresented. Furthermore, the vote "became both the symbol of the free, sexually autonomous woman and the means by which the goals of a feminist sexual culture were to be attained."<sup>3</sup> For Josephine Butler and other leaders of the women's movement, the vote was the best way to end prostitution, facilitate divorce, and raise public morals.

A second factor in the attention devoted to odd women derived from new definitions of sexuality. Moving away from a mid-Victorian notion of female "passionlessness," or sexual anaesthesia, advanced late-nineteenth-century thinkers acknowledged women's capacity for sexual pleasure and discussed the psychological and biological harmfulness of celibacy. One of the significant factors in this change was the recognition of female sexual desire, both as a physical function and as a health requirement. Physicians promoted the idea that women needed sexual intercourse just as men did, and that "the evil results of abstinence are especially noticeable in women."<sup>4</sup> In 1882, for example, Dr. Charles Taylor, an American obstetrician, warned that unmarried women needed to protect their health by finding other outlets for their "unemployed functions," or suffer the consequences of "disturbance" and "weakness."<sup>5</sup>

Although Taylor's recommendations for his sexually unemployed women involved exercise and reading rather than, say, masturbation, lesbianism, or premarital sex, this view of the dangers of celibacy was difficult for many Victorian women to accept. Educated to believe that women's chief superiority to man lay in her greater spirituality and passionlessness, even advanced feminist thinkers of the *fin de siècle*

found it difficult to reconcile their vision of a new social order with an acceptance or endorsement of female sexuality. The social purity campaigns of the 1880s, such as the twenty-year effort to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, which finally succeeded in 1886, the campaign for incest legislation that began in 1885, and the revelations of child prostitution in Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (1885) had left women traumatized by their discoveries of abusive male sexuality. Repealers "tended to view sex not merely as male-defined, but as *male*, while women were promoted as the agents regulating immorality—powerful but asexual guardians of the nation's morals."<sup>8</sup>

By the turn of the century, there were feminists and suffragists who saw celibacy as a "silent strike" against oppressive relations with men. The suffragette leader Christabel Pankhurst saw female celibacy as a political response to men's corrupt sexual behaviors and widespread venereal infections. "There can be no mating between the spiritually developed women of this new day and men who in thought and conduct with regard to sex matters are their inferiors," she wrote.<sup>9</sup> Some feminists argued that an "unhusbanded class of women" was necessary for "the task of raising the fair sex out of its subjection."<sup>10</sup> They maintained that celibacy was not harmful to women, but indeed healthful, and that "woman is physically complete" without sex: "Though she is a necessity to man, he is not necessary to her."<sup>11</sup> Writers such as Frances Swiney maintained that sexual intercourse was inherently an abusive and dangerous act and that sperm was a virulent poison composed of alcohol, nicotine, and venereal germs. Swiney further believed that men were a "defective variation" of the female gene and that intercourse should take place only for purposes of reproduction at widely-spaced intervals of two or three years.<sup>12</sup>

More moderate feminists endorsed celibacy on ideological, medical, or spiritual grounds, or advocated it as a temporary political strategy. Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary that it might be needful for a generation of women to sacrifice their sexuality to a cause, for women "with strong natures to remain celibate; so that the special force of womanhood—motherly feeling—may be forced into public work."<sup>13</sup> For her cousin Margaret Harkness, who came to London alone to earn her living as a journalist at the age of twenty-three, a single life allowed both social usefulness and independence. "So few women have enough character to live an unmarried life," she wrote to a friend, "or not sink into a nobody, or still worse into a general nuisance. I think an

unmarried woman living a true life is far nobler than a married woman."<sup>14</sup>

By the 1880s it was possible for middle-class single women like Webb and Harkness to work, to find housing, and to find a community of friends.<sup>15</sup> Between marriage and celibacy, however, there were few sexual alternatives for respectable women. Heterosexual affairs were the realm of the prostitute; lesbianism was not recognized in public or medical discourse. By 1884, only four cases of lesbian homosexuality had been reported in European and American medical literature, and all were transvestites. The Labouchère Amendment of 1885 did not mention lesbianism, and J. A. Symonds devoted only two pages of his *Problem in Greek Ethics* to it. Nevertheless, close long-term attachments between women, whether the "romantic friendship" or the "Boston marriage," were both acknowledged and accepted. And although lesbianism had relatively little official place in medical discourse, it was a topic in literature and art, obviously well understood by a general audience. In Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880), for example, Bell Blount, the "Lady President for the West Hill Society for Women's Rights," lives with another woman, her "good little wife," kisses the innocent heroine with "strange warmth," and preaches on "the best and truest love that the world can give—the love between women without the degrading and disturbing influence of man." By the mid-1880s, sexologists began to pay more attention to the phenomenon of lesbianism, although they saw it as morbid and masculine. Krafft-Ebing included lesbianism among the sexual perversions he discussed in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1889), placing homosexual women along a scale from "invisible" to highly masculinized. He maintained that "Uranism may nearly always be suspected in females wearing their hair short, or who dress in the fashion of men, or pursue the sports and pastimes of their male acquaintances; also in opera singers and actresses who appear in male attire on the stage by preference." Lesbianism was also seen as linked with feminism. In his essay on homogenic love, Edward Carpenter observed "that the movement among women towards their own liberation and emancipation, which is taking place all over the civilised world, has been accompanied by a marked development of the homogenic passion among the female sex."<sup>16</sup>

The popular image of the odd woman conflated elements of the lesbian, the angular spinster, and the hysterical feminist. The mannish woman orator was an especially popular satiric figure in popular novels:

"It would not be obvious to a stranger," wrote Rhoda Broughton in *Dear Faustina* (1897), "that it is not a slender man who is preparing to address the little group, so austere masculine is the just-grey-touched thick short hair parted on side, the coat, the tie, the waistcoat." To claim the pulpit or the podium was in itself such a transgression of "womanly" modesty that the most ladylike feminist campaigners seemed decidedly out of place and odd. "There is something repugnant to the ordinary Englishman in the idea of a woman mounting a platform and facing the noisy, gaping, vulgar crowd of an election meeting," wrote Mary Jeune in the 1890s.<sup>17</sup> The tireless anti-feminist campaigner and novelist Eliza Lynn Linton scornfully described the various speakers at a women's emancipation meeting in *The Rebel of the Family*: the "lady from America" who "did her business in a workmanlike manner, with no more agitation, shyness or embarrassment than if she had been a man"; the well-dressed and polished "specimen of a female public orator" whose "case-hardened self-sufficiency was as ugly as a physical deformity"; and the mannish woman with "close-cropped hair, a Tyrolean hat . . . a waistcoat and a short jacket."

Linton also coined the phrase "shrieking sisterhood" to describe feminist activities and speakers. "One of our quarrels with the Advanced Women of our generation," she wrote, "is the hysterical parade they make about their wants and their intentions . . . for every hysterical advocate 'the cause' loses a rational adherent and gains a disgusted opponent."<sup>18</sup> As late as 1907, the term was still in wide use, as one suffragist lamented: "It stares at us from letters to the newspapers almost daily."<sup>19</sup> It was an easier explanation to see women's desire for emancipation as a form of unbalance in the reproductive system and mind than to take it seriously; and the argument was doubly useful because it also showed how dangerous to the public would be "the incorporation of these instabilities into the structures of political life."<sup>20</sup> In opposing the women's suffrage bill in 1871, a Tory parliamentarian argued that if women had the vote, "our legislation would develop hysterical and spasmodic qualities."<sup>21</sup>

With such a flourishing literature, visual tradition, and medical discourse about female oddness, one might well ask about the odd man. "What has become of the marrying man?" one essayist asked in 1888. "Is he not becoming as extinct as the dodo? Will not future generations of geologists gloat over the infrequent discovery of his precious bones in rare rocks? Already he is hard to find and coy to

catch."<sup>22</sup> Many Victorian men married late or never, lived a bachelor existence, and spent their adult lives with only male friendships. The odd man, however, was not seen as a problem. His life could be one of dignity and honor, or, while he was young, of adventure and challenge. While Sarah Grand satirized anti-feminist men as the "bawling brotherhood," misogyny seemed much more natural than feminism.<sup>23</sup> And masculine oddness, of course, did not entail celibacy. "How many men *have you known* who have reached the age of 30, and been absolutely celibate? What in England among the middle classes should you say was the proportion of celibate men?" wrote Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson in 1886.<sup>24</sup> There is no record of Pearson's reply, but we may guess its contents.

Odd men also explained that they were unwilling to link themselves with emancipated women who might have needs and ambitions of their own. Beatrice Webb recorded in her diary a conversation she had about marriage with Alfred Marshall, a Cambridge professor who was "the single most effective enemy of degrees for women."<sup>25</sup> According to Webb, he held that "woman was a subordinate being, and that, if she ceased to be subordinate, there would be no object for a man to marry. That marriage was a sacrifice of masculine freedom, and would only be tolerated by male creatures so long as it meant the devotion, body and soul, of the female to the male. . . . Contrast was the essence of the matrimonial relation: feminine weakness contrasted with masculine strength: masculine egotism with feminine self-devotion. 'If you compete with us we shan't marry you,' he summed up with a laugh."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, if men did not marry, Grant Allen explained, it was not because they were odd but because they had so many more interesting things to do: "In America, the young man has gone West. In England, he is in the army, in the navy, in the Indian Civil Service, in the Cape Mounted Rifles. He is sheep-farming in New Zealand, ranching in Colorado, growing tea in Assam, planting coffee in Ceylon; he is a cowboy in Montana, or a wheat-farmer in Manitoba, or a diamond-digger at Kimberley, or a merchant at Melbourne; in short, he is everywhere and anywhere, except where he ought to be, making love to the pretty girls in England. For, being a man, I, of course, take it for granted that the first business of a girl is to be pretty."<sup>27</sup>

If the marrying man was becoming "extinct as the dodo," a bachelor explained in an essay in *Temple Bar* called "Why Men Do Not Marry," in 1888, it was not because he was odd. "I am thirty-one years of

age," he wrote. "I am a dancing and dining man; I am not a slave to a club; I am no misogynist; I am moderately well-to-do in my profession and could marry if I chose. But, on the whole, I prefer to remain single. Why?" It was because he was too comfortable living the single life, too reluctant to lower his standard of living for the sake of female companionship. "I consider the domestic dinner gruesome," the bachelor confessed. "I prefer to keep a horse; I prefer a comfortable annual trip to the Continent, or to America; I prefer pictures and china, shilling cigars and first-rate hock."<sup>28</sup>

It's an appealing picture, and one can well imagine that if odd women were allowed more business than being pretty, they too might have preferred travel, dining at the club, and comfortable surroundings to preparing the domestic dinner. Indeed, in a poem called "A Ballad of Religion and Marriage," the novelist Amy Levy predicted a future in which the concept of universal marriage and domestic drudgery would decline along with religious faith:

Monogamous, still at our post.  
 Recently we undergo  
 Domestic round of boiled and roast,  
 Yet deem the whole proceeding slow,  
  
 Daily the secret murmurs grow;  
 We are no more content to plod  
 Along the beaten paths—and so  
 Marriage must go the way of God.  
  
 Grant, in a million years at most,  
 Folk shall be neither pairs nor odd—  
 Alas! We shan't be there to boast  
 "Marriage has gone the way of God!"<sup>29</sup>

In addition to Levy, other odd women writers described the lives of single women in single rooms. Isabella O. Ford's *On the Threshold* (1895), Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Annie Holdsworth's *Joanna Trail, Spinster* (1894), and Netta Syrett's *Nobody's Fault* (1896) envisioned possibilities for women outside of marriage. But while feminist novelists wrote about odd women, it is a significant paradox that "the literary beneficiaries of nineteenth-century feminism were men rather than women."<sup>30</sup> The answer may be in both the internal and external pressure for this literature to be representative, to speak for Woman. Reviewers of the novels insisted

on seeing them as the products of a collective consciousness. As W. T. Stead put it, "The Modern Woman novel is not merely a novel written by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman."<sup>31</sup>

The connection between oddness and oratory and the subtext of lesbianism shape two of the most interesting novels men wrote about the nineteenth-century women's movement, Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) and Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1891). Both novels deal with the questions of feminist celibacy, "womanliness," and sexual repression, but also with more submerged male agendas about competition with women for power and speech.

In writing *The Bostonians*, James chose a topic he felt was "very national, very typical": "I wished to write a very American tale," he noted in 1883, "a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf."<sup>32</sup> He also chose to depict a Boston marriage, "one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England." When he had completed it, James thought it "the best fiction I have ever written," yet it also proved his most disappointing novel, one from which he had "expected so much and derived so little."<sup>33</sup> A lengthy review in the *Women's Journal* of 1886 called it nothing but a caricature of the suffrage movement, and his own brother William charged him with ridiculing Elizabeth Peabody as the suffragist Miss Birdseye, whose blurred features, "dim little smile," and many-pocketed loose dress bespeak her status as a "confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman," a monitory image of what befalls women who take up public speech. James himself came to feel that he had not realized the potential of his American tale. In a letter to William he said he regretted having displeased some of his readers with generalizations about the character of Boston and joked that he might have "to write another. 'The Other Bostonians.'" <sup>34</sup>

The idea of "the other Bostonians," a kind of ghost novel or double within James's text, is fascinating, especially since the novel itself suggests so many possible readings and endings. In a plot that critics have described as a "satiric replay of the Civil War on the battlefields of sex," James sets up an erotic triangle of competition between a Boston feminist, Olive Chancellor, and a Southern conservative, Basil Ransom, for the love of Verena Tallant, a young woman orator. Alike

in their rigidity, Basil and Olive have very different outlets and ideologies. While both see their age as decadent and demoralized, they have comically opposite agendas for its repair. Olive looks to "the influx of the great feminine element" to shape up her society, while Basil laments the degree to which it is already "womanized," and lacking "masculine tone." Basil is the "stiffest of conservatives," who looks like "a column of figures," aspires to write for the *Rational Review*, and considers women "have no business to be reasonable"; Olive preaches a kind of romantic feminism based on oppression and suffering: "The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned." Olive believes that women must redeem the age and that men must step back; Basil believes that women "should not think too much, not feel any responsibility for the government of the world."

Depending on their own alignments, critics have seen Basil either as a rescuing prince or as a cruel misogynist and Olive as either a noble figure or a "latent lesbian with a deep-seated sexual neurosis."<sup>35</sup> James describes Olive in the standard terms used for the odd and militant spinster; she has "absolutely no figure," is unable to laugh, and seems horrified by sex. To Basil, she "was so essentially a celibate that he found himself thinking of her as old," although in fact they are about the same age. Olive's feminism is related to her class status in a way that James presents as rarefied and unnatural. The celibacy of the Back Bay heiress seems to symbolize the sterility of an old Yankee aristocracy no longer viable in the post-war environment. Olive and her sister feminists lament their lack of success with shop-girls, who are stubbornly romantic about their suitors, and always "cared far more about Charlie than about the ballot." Olive's longing for a "friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of souls" seems equally arid and unreal.

Moreover, her feminism is tied up with her ecstatic and neurotic longing for martyrdom: "the most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day . . . be a martyr and die for something." Like other nineteenth-century women intellectuals, such as Florence Nightingale and Margaret Fuller, Olive longs to become the feminist messiah, the woman whose suffering will redeem her sex.

The language James uses to describe her feelings suggests Olive's envy of the men who had had the chance to fight in the Civil War: "It seemed to her at times that she had been born to lead a crusade." Joan of Arc is her symbol of feminist militant martyrdom and ardor; and to her smitten gaze, Verena looks "as if, like Joan, she might have had visits from the saints." As James notes, her plan is to supply Verena's eloquence with "facts and figures," so that she will be "armed at all points, like Joan of Arc (this analogy had lodged itself in Olive's imagination)." Joan of Arc was indeed a significant imaginative figure for Victorian feminists and especially for single women. "That kind is not to be possessed by one man; she belongs to a cause," the novelist Florence Converse wrote of Joan of Arc in *Diana Victrix* (1897). Vernon Lee's lover, Kit Anstruther-Thompson, was painted by John Singer Sargent as a modern Joan "wearing her cloak like a breast-plate."<sup>36</sup> During the suffrage campaign, Joan of Arc was used as an archetypal figure of holy and righteous militance by women attempting to "reinhabit the empty body of female allegory, to reclaim its meanings in behalf of the female sex."<sup>37</sup> Beatified on April 16, 1909, St. Joan represented the chastity, courage, and persecution of female militancy. She was also a border case—a figure who defied gender categories, who both transcended and represented femininity. In France in the 1880s and 1890s, she was claiming a cult and, in England and the United States, had become as much the "patron saint of a sex" as of a country.<sup>38</sup>

In Olive's mind, the female crusader, like St. Joan, must be a virgin as well as a martyr; celibacy is the price she must pay for leadership. "Priests . . . never married, and what you and I dream of doing," she tells Verena, "demands of us a kind of priesthood." Verena must give up sexuality and love: "Thou shalt renounce, refrain, abstain!" Yet in James's view, for Olive herself, celibacy, renunciation, and abstinence have led to a kind of sterility. As much as she longs to speak, she is "awkward and embarrassed and dry," while the flirtatious Verena overflows with words.

Olive and Basil seem to be battling for Verena's body, but in another sense they are battling for her voice. Basil sees the freedom of emancipated female speech as particularly subversive. He finds "the age too talkative," "querulous, hysterical," "chattering" and feminized. He wants women to be "private and passive." If he marries Verena, he thinks to himself, "he should know a way to strike her dumb." He intends Verena to turn her "ranting" in public into charming con-



versation at the dinner table; and significantly when he appears to carry her off before her great speech at the Boston Music Hall, she is struck dumb by his presence and scarcely needs to be muffled in the hood of her velvet cloak as he takes her away. Much of Basil's determination to capture and silence Verena comes from his discomfort with her success at a time when he is struggling to get his writing published. Significantly, as Josephine Hendin points out, after a long love scene in Central Park in which he reduces Verena to silence, "Basil has his first success at publication."<sup>39</sup> Female chattiness must be transformed into submissive sexuality if men are to hold the field.

There is a hint at the end of the novel, however, that Olive, having loved, lost, and suffered, has also overcome silence. When Verena leaves with Basil, Olive must take her place on the platform. Her moment of speech is offered up as martyrdom, presenting herself to the disappointed audience to be "hissed and hooted and insulted," "trampled to death and torn to pieces." But in fact, when she mounts the platform, like "some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions," "the hush was respectful." Olive can now speak for the movement; she can realize her long-stifled personal longing for eloquence. In losing Verena, Olive gains her own voice and fulfills her destiny.

George Gissing's attitudes towards Victorian feminism were very mixed, and one critic called him "a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation."<sup>40</sup> His attraction to feminism was primarily one of self-interest. "My demand for female 'equality,'" he wrote to his friend Edouard Bertz, "simply means that I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women . . . I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman. That type must disappear, or at all events become altogether subordinate." Furthermore, Gissing identified with "oddness," difference, and alienation as social characteristics. He viewed himself as an outsider—a "born exile," as his biographer Gillian Tindall puts it—doomed by his class, his sexuality, and his art. Thus he was sympathetic towards the plight of marginal women.

On the other hand, he was always profoundly skeptical about the possibility of fulfilling permanent relationships between men and women. In his personal life, the conflict between his impossibly romantic ideals of women and a strong self-destructive impulse led him to make disastrous emotional and marital commitments. His first wife

was a young prostitute he had attempted to reform, even stealing money (and going to prison) when he was eighteen to help her; his second was an alcoholic who bore him two sons, but finally had to be institutionalized. Gissing's attitudes towards feminists were colored by his prejudices about feminine attractiveness and "normality." In October 1888, during a trip to Paris, he went to hear the feminist-anarchist Louise Michel speak on "Le rôle des femmes dans l'humanité." While Gissing was struck by her ideas and by the vision of free womanhood, he also found her personally unattractive—plain, badly dressed, coarse, and "unwomanly."

In *The Odd Women*, Gissing had the brilliant idea of revising James's sexual triangle to show what might happen when the independent feminist herself is courted by a sexually attractive man; it's as if Basil Ransom were to try to seduce Olive rather than Verena. Like Olive Chancellor, Rhoda Nunn, the explicitly named heroine of Gissing's novel, is a self-declared odd woman: "So many odd women—no making a pair with them," Rhoda declares. "The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives. I, naturally, being one of them, take another view." She has taken vows of chastity and service, and she compares herself and her choice of celibacy in the women's movement to the Christian saints: "There will have to be a widespread revolt against sexual instinct. Christianity couldn't spread over the world without the help of the ascetic ideal, and this great movement for women's emancipation must also have its ascetics."

At the beginning of the novel, Rhoda's position is an uncompromisingly radical one. She fiercely opposes marriage as an institution and is hostile towards men, whom she regards as untrustworthy and dishonorable. What silences women, she argues, is not sexual frustration, but rather the myth of romantic love; sentimentality; jealousy; and anguish over male betrayal. Rhoda believes that her oddness gives her both exemplary power and rhetorical force and that her integrity and powers of leadership depend on her remaining single: "My work is to help those women who by sheer necessity must live alone—women whom vulgar opinion ridicules. How can I help them so effectively as by living among them, one of them, and showing that my life is anything but weariness and lamentation?" Rhoda believes, too, that the feminist movement will never progress unless women can become "hard-hearted" and separate their emotions from practical decisions: "It isn't personal feeling that directs a great movement in civilization." She is harsh and unsympathetic to those who fall by the

wayside, such as Bella Royce, who has been seduced and abandoned by a married man. But her friend Mary Barfoot, with whom she directs a business school for women, takes a different view, arguing that a feminism that has sacrificed compassion to the desire for power will ultimately fail: "To work for women one must keep one's womanhood."

Rhoda's principles are put to a severe test when she falls in love with the cynical ex-radical Everard Barfoot. Barfoot, of course, is not celibate and has indeed had a child with a working-class girl. Strongly attracted to Rhoda, he is primarily motivated by the desire for conquest. To subjugate the militant virgin would be a delicious victory; and while he is both genuinely drawn to Rhoda and impressed by her strength and intelligence, the pleasure of domination never escapes him. When he looks at her full but "impregnable" lips, tries to capture her "strong, shapely" hand, or gazes into her "fine eyes," he thinks of her as an odd woman, a collector's item, "an unfamiliar sexual type . . . hinting at the possibility of subtle feminine forces that might be released by circumstances." What appeals to him most is the thought of her "unconditional surrender," a surrender which is to be both ideological and sexual: "delighting in her independence of mind, he still desired to see her in complete subjugation to him, to inspire her with unreflecting passion."

Rhoda has always assumed that only the working classes are slaves to their sexuality; while "the daughters of educated people" are capable of self-discipline, "working-class girls," as Mary Barfoot declares, "are absorbed in preoccupation with their animal nature"; or, as Everard brutally puts it, they are "mere lumps of flesh." Yet to Rhoda's shock and humiliation, it is not as easy to suppress her sexuality and desire for love from a man as she had hoped. Gissing makes clear that she is a passionate woman and that it is hard for her to deal with her feelings. In her romance with Everard Barfoot, Rhoda realizes that she is capable not only of intense desire but also of agonizing jealousy; she is humbled to recognize that for all her education and elegance, she is as susceptible to her "animal nature" as the shopgirls she disdains. In the end, Rhoda refuses to marry Barfoot, having recognized his superficiality; but her life is irrevocably changed.

Gissing contrasts this story with the parallel plot of the unhappily married woman, the shopgirl Monica Madden, who marries a reclusive older man, Edmund Widdowson, in order to escape her drudgery and to provide for her indigent spinster sisters. Unable to bear her husband's possessiveness and narrowness, Monica embarks on a disastrous

romance with a younger man and meets the classic fate of the adulteress, death in childbirth. Thus the odd woman and the odd couple dramatize the problems of reconciling theory and practice in the realm of human emotions.

Contemporary feminist readers of the novel criticized Gissing's pessimistic conclusions. In a review for the *Illustrated London News* in 1893, the journalist Clementina Black expressed disappointment in the unhappy outcome of the love affair of Everard and Rhoda: "We feel, as we read, that between two persons so clear-sighted, so outspoken, and so fully aware of the pitfalls of married life, the natural end would be a real marriage—that is to say, an equal union, in which each would respect the freedom and individuality of the other, and in which each would find the completest development."

Yet, like James, Gissing hints that sexuality and loss are necessary for a truly compassionate social movement; as Samuel Butler rewrites Tennyson, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all." Mary Barfoot warns Rhoda that she must not become a fanatic about oddness or odd women will die out: "After all, we don't desire the end of the race." In order for Rhoda to preserve her integrity and yet for the movement of odd women not to seem sterile, the Madden sisters and Rhoda adopt Monica's child. Thus there is a kind of magical collective maternity at the end; the fallen woman has left them her daughter to raise, a baby who may grow up to be "a brave woman." This solution to the maternal needs of odd women and to the perpetuation of a celibate generation echoed real-life solutions of Victorian women. The social worker Mary Carpenter adopted a five-year-old child when she was fifty-one and rejoiced in having "a little girl of my own, . . . ready made to hand, and nicely trained, without the trouble of marrying." Later the militant suffragette Charlotte Despard adopted the illegitimate daughter of a cavalry officer.<sup>41</sup> But as Martha Vicinus points out in her study of independent Victorian women, "middle-aged single women simply could not change their life-styles to fit the imperative demands of children," and these adoptions, seemingly so miraculous a solution, rarely were successful.<sup>42</sup>

In many respects, representations of the single woman do not seem to have changed much since the *fin de siècle*. In a modern novel inspired by Gissing, Gail Godwin's *The Odd Woman* (1975), the heroine Jane Clifford protests against Rhoda's self-destructive sublimation of sexuality into a cause: "You've proved your admirable point—that in the nineteenth century you are able to forego the legal form of marriage

to preserve your independence. And he had proved he loves you enough to give up his prized bachelorhood and marry you. Why not get married and do more interesting things than destroy your love with ideologies?" An unmarried professor of English and Women's Studies, Jane Clifford seems to have many more options than Rhoda or Olive. In addition to her professional status, she has the advantage of having read Gissing, and she is even preparing a lecture on *The Odd Women*: "She had chosen Gissing for an opener because of his unrelenting pessimism. It was one of the few nineteenth-century novels she could think of in which every main female character who was allowed to live through the last page had to do so alone. The book's ending depressed her utterly, and she was eager to fling it into a classroom of young women (and men?) who still believed that they would get everything and see how they would deal with Gissing's assurance that they would not." Yet Jane herself ends in solitude, having broken off her love affair with a married professor of art history; and her friend, the militant feminist Gerda Mulvaney, editor of the radical newspaper *Feme Sole*, is hard-hearted and coarse. Godwin seems to be indicating that despite the success of women novelists, women professors, feminist journals, and women's studies, little has changed.

The film version of *The Bostonians* in 1984, produced by the team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory and written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, retells James's story, but like Godwin's novel, is even less optimistic about the prospects of the modern odd woman. The film version is explicit where James is ambiguous, changing the nuances of his text into much stronger anti-feminist fare for the Reagan decade. Whereas James is consistently critical of Basil Ransom, the film casts him as Christopher Reeve, who brings his film persona as Superman to bear on the battle of the sexes with an Olive who is older than the character in the book, clearly lesbian and neurotic, and played by Vanessa Redgrave, an actress associated with a number of other radical and eccentric roles. The women's feminism, the film suggests through Redgrave's performance, through the deployment of suggestive visual images, and through its use of music, is really a hysterical displacement of sexual longings. In a brilliant touch, the filmmakers pick up on a minor detail in the novel for the opening frames of the film: that of the great organ in the Boston Music Hall, which "lifted to the dome its shining pipes and sculptured pinnacles, and some genius of music or oratory erected himself in monumental bronze at the base." Only in listening to music have Olive and Verena found an outlet com-

mensurate to their revolutionary passions; "as they sat looking at the great florid, sombre organ, overhanging the bronze statue of Beethoven, they felt that this was the only temple in which the votaries of their creed could worship." As Merchant and Ivory represent it, however, the mammoth organ which dominates the opening minutes of the film becomes a punning visual metaphor for the spectacularly phallic Basil Ransom, who comes to rescue Verena from Olive's shrivelled embrace. When Olive speaks at the Boston Music Hall, her words are, ironically, a man's: Jhabvala gives her the words of William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>43</sup>

Debates over female oddness that took place in the 1880s will also sound very familiar to contemporary American readers. Once again, we are hearing that women are becoming redundant, that there is a frightening shortage of men, and that the feminist movement betrayed women by encouraging them to postpone marriage for a career. Once again we are hearing that men are unwilling to marry women who cherish ambitions like their own and who may compete with them. In 1986, a group of Yale sociologists issued a study claiming to prove that feminists postponing marriage for career risked permanent spinsterhood. "According to the report," *Newsweek* explained in an article called "Too Late for Prince Charming," "college-educated women who are still single at 30 have only a 20 percent chance of marrying. By the age of 35 the odds drop to 5 percent. Forty-year-olds are more likely to be killed by a terrorist. They have a minuscule 2.6 percent possibility of tying the knot."<sup>44</sup> Follow-up articles like "Single Women: Coping with a Void" on the front page of *The New York Times* reinforced the sense of crisis.<sup>45</sup> In a letter to the *Times*, one woman sarcastically thanked the editors "for running that neat article on how single women feel sorry for themselves. What I really liked about it was how it wasn't the least little bit slanted. After all, 'void,' 'stigma,' 'aging brings acceptance,' 'rabid' feminist response—these are all neutral terms."<sup>46</sup> The *Newsweek* story, as many feminists pointed out, seemed "to regard the specter of singlehood for women as conservatives view the advent of AIDS among male homosexuals: as a fitting curse brought on by the transgressions of the 'victims.'"<sup>47</sup> The sexual anarchy of women seeking higher education, serious careers, and egalitarian spouses, it hinted, had engendered its own punishment. An avalanche of movies and television shows about hard-driving career women stopped in their fast tracks by babies drove home the message that post-feminist motherhood, not a career, was the real prize.

In an essay for *The New York Times Magazine* called "Why Wed? The Ambivalent American Bachelor," Trip Gabriel explored the reasons for men's reluctance to marry, reasons very similar to those offered by the bachelor writing in *Temple Bar* a century before. "The word they use is 'scary,'" Gabriel noted of the bachelors on "the supply-side curve." While they had told themselves that they were waiting to marry until the right woman came along, many of these men gradually realized that they were never going to be ready to commit themselves to marriage. Single life was too comfortable, although sexual adventure, in the age of AIDS, was no longer much of a temptation. Many of the men Gabriel interviewed were using sports to fill the space in their lives left by the absence of wives and families: "Many men today are more obsessed with working out than they ever were as schoolboys. Some bachelors seem to have effected a simple exchange: the vicissitudes and uncertainties of a single man's sex life for the known payoffs of athletics."<sup>48</sup>

Articles like these, which are recycled in the press, blame the unrealistic expectations generated by the women's movement for the loneliness, singleness, and oddness of career-oriented women, while they accept the most narcissistic behavior of men as natural and unchangeable. They also act as a not-too-subtle form of propaganda aimed at frightening women away from feminism. Loneliness and fear of male violence are all-too-real factors of women's lives at the end of the twentieth century, and anger at both feminism and men seems like a natural outlet for these feelings. As Judith Walkowitz and Judith Newton commented, "contemporary feminists have still not determined how to articulate a feminist sexual politics that simultaneously addresses the possibilities of female sexual pleasure and the realities of sexual danger, and the ideological splits which generated tension among early feminists are still being played out today."<sup>49</sup> There is a renewed emphasis in the 1980s on women as sexual victims in cases of sexual harassment, rape, wife abuse, and incest. Feminist campaigns against pornography have divided the women's movement. The most extreme statements in the campaign have come from Andrea Dworkin, who argued in her study *Intercourse* (1987) that sexual intercourse is the basis and symbol of women's oppression. In language strongly reminiscent of the 1880s purity campaigners, Dworkin described intercourse as "the pure, sterile, formal expression of men's contempt for women," but envisioned "freedom from intercourse" as an unlikely social development "because there is a hatred of women, unexplained,

undiagnosed, mostly unacknowledged, that pervades sexual practice and sexual passion."<sup>50</sup>

But while Andrea Dworkin campaigns relentlessly against intercourse and pornography in "Amerika," other women who also call themselves feminists believe that women are still sexually repressed and that many aspects of women's lives and feelings are different from the norms of the late-nineteenth century. As Linda Gordon and Ellen DuBois note, "the increasing tendency to focus almost exclusively on sex as the primary area of women's exploitation, and to attribute women's sexual victimization to some violent essence labelled 'male sexuality' is even more conservative today, because our situation as women has changed so radically." Women today, they eloquently remind us, "have possibilities for sexual subjectivity and self-creation today that did not exist in the past. We have a vision of sexuality that is not exclusively heterosexual, nor tied to reproduction. We have a much better physiological understanding of sexual feeling, and a vision of ungended parenting. We have several strong intellectual traditions for understanding the physiological and social formation of sexuality. Perhaps most important, we have today at least a chance at economic independence, the necessary material condition for women's sexual liberation. Finally, we have something women have never enjoyed before—a feminist past, a history of 150 years of feminist theory and praxis in the area of sexuality."<sup>51</sup>

The changes in women's lives brought about by feminism have made the status of the unmarried woman at the end of the twentieth century very different from that of a Rhoda Nunn, an Olive Chancellor, or a Verena Tarrant a century before. Female singleness no longer has to mean celibacy; and, at least for the time being, the "spectre of death or disease from back-street abortion, of shame and dire social perils for the 'fallen women' who conceived when single . . . no longer [haunts] the sexual encounters of unmarried and sexually active women."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, single motherhood is a real if difficult option for those who desire it and, increasingly, a standard family pattern among black women. Single women may not be odd at all in the future but rather the majority, as they are already in some cultures and some countries. These new patterns may look like sexual anarchy when they are compared to the still-potent Hollywood images of the American family, but they are clearly part of a new sexual system emerging at the *fin de siècle*.

# THREE

## New Women

Be bold and yet be bold,  
But be not overbold,  
Although the knell is tolled  
Of the tyranny of old,

And meet your splendid doom  
On heaven-scaling wings,  
Woman, from whose bright womb  
The radiant future springs!  
(John Davidson, "To the New Woman") (1894)

Unlike the odd woman, celibate, sexually repressed, and easily pitied or patronized as the flotsam and jetsam of the matrimonial tide, the sexually independent New Woman criticized society's insistence on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life. "On the eve of the twentieth century," the French historian Michelle Perrot observed, "the image of the New Woman was widespread in Europe from Vienna to London, from Munich and Heidelberg to Brussels and Paris."<sup>1</sup> In the United States, too, the New Woman, university-educated and sexually independent, engendered intense hostility and fear as she seemed to challenge male supremacy in art, the professions, and the home.<sup>2</sup> Politically, the New Woman was an anarchic figure who threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule. Journalists described her in

the vocabulary of insurrection and apocalypse as one who had "ranged herself perversely with the forces of cultural anarchism and decay."<sup>3</sup> In an essay comparing the New Woman to the anarchist women of the French Revolution and the *pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune of 1871, a critic for the *Quarterly Review* saw her as a woman warrior: "In her wide-spread, tumultuous battalions . . . she advances, with drums beating and colours flying, to the sound also of the Phrygian flute, a disordered array, but nowise daunted, resolute in her determination to end what she is pleased to define as the slavery of one-half the human race."<sup>4</sup>

In 1888, the novelist Mona Caird wrote a series of columns for the London *Daily Telegraph* called "Is Marriage a Failure?" in which she argued that marriage as an institution was based on the economic dependence of the wife and that it restricted the freedom of both sexes. Over twenty-seven thousand readers wrote in with their comments, most in strong agreement. With their new opportunities for education, work, and mobility, New Women saw that they had alternatives to marriage. And another novelist, Ella Hepworth Dixon; explained, "If young and pleasing women are permitted by public opinion to go to college, to live alone, to travel, to have a profession, to belong to a club, to give parties, to read and discuss whatsoever seems good to them, and to go to theatres without masculine escort, they have most of the privileges—and others thrown in—for which the girl of twenty or thirty years ago was ready to barter herself for the first suitor who offered himself and the shelter of his name."<sup>5</sup>

As women sought opportunities for self-development outside of marriage, medicine and science warned that such ambitions would lead to sickness, freakishness, sterility, and racial degeneration. In France, the *femme nouvelle* was often caricatured as a *cerveline*, a dried-up pedant with an oversized head; an androgynous flat-chested *garçonnet*, more like a teenage boy than a woman; or a masculine *hommesse*. Alarmed by the wave of feminist activity which swept France from 1889 to 1900, including twenty-one feminist periodicals and three international congresses; and the highly publicized decline in the national birthrate, doctors, politicians, and journalists united in condemnation of the New Woman and in celebration of the traditional female role. "Feminists are wrong when they turn women away from the duties of their sex," wrote Victor Jozé in the journal *La Plume*, "and when they turn their heads with illusory emancipatory ideas,

which are unrealizable and absurd. Let woman remain what Nature has made her: an ideal woman, the companion and lover of a man, the mistress of the home."<sup>6</sup>

In England, male anxiety focused on the biological imperative of reproduction and on what the poet John Davidson called "the bright womb from which the future springs." Doctors maintained that the New Woman was dangerous to society because her obsession with developing her brain starved the uterus; even if she should wish to marry, she would be unable to reproduce. "The bachelor woman," wrote G. Stanley Hall, ". . . has taken up and utilized in her own life all that was meant for her descendants, and has so overdrawn her account with heredity that, like every perfectly and completely developed individual, she is also completely sterile. This is the very apotheosis of selfishness from the standpoint of every biological ethics."<sup>7</sup> In his presidential address to the British Medical Association in 1886, Dr. William Withers Moore warned that educated women would become "more or less sexless. And the human race will have lost those who should have been her sons. Bacon, for want of a mother, will not be born."<sup>8</sup> Discussing the New Woman who has "gone out to labour in the world," the scientists Geddes and Thomson warned even more apocalyptically that such women "have highly developed brains but most of them die young."<sup>9</sup>

The New Woman was also the nervous woman. Doctors linked what they saw as an epidemic of nervous disorders including anorexia, neurasthenia, and hysteria with the changes in women's aspirations. Women's conflicts over using their gifts, moreover, would doom them to lives of nervous illness. As Dr. T. Clifford Allbutt commented, "the stir in neurotic problems first began with the womankind." By the 1890s, he continued, "daily we see neurotics, neurasthenics, hysterics and the like . . . every large city is filled with nerve-specialists and their chambers with patients."<sup>10</sup> It was estimated that there were fourteen neurasthenic women for every neurasthenic man, one hysterical man to twenty hysterical women.<sup>11</sup> In his preface to *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Thomas Hardy confidently describes his heroine, Sue Bridehead, as "the woman of the feminist movement—the slight, pale 'bachelor' girl—the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities." In the same year, in their *Studies on Hysteria*, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer noted that hysterical girls were likely to be "lively, gifted, and full of intellectual interests." Among their patients in Vienna were "girls



What the New Woman Will Make of the New Man!,  
Punch, 1895.

who get out of bed at night so as secretly to carry on some study that their parents have forbidden for fear of overworking"; and women of "powerful intellect" and "sharp and critical common sense" like "Anna O."

The battle against the New Woman was waged as intensely in the pages of *Punch*, *The Yellow Book*, and the circulating library as in the clinic. Scarcely an issue of *Punch* appeared without a cartoon or parody of New Women (Figure 1). In *The Yellow Book*, too, both male and female aesthetes wrote alarming stories about the "fatal repercussions . . . when women attempt to take the initiative, particularly in marriage, or attempt to assert themselves emotionally."<sup>12</sup> In 1882 an anonymous novel called *The Revolt of Man* described the war between the sexes led by insurgent New Women. In a matriarchal England of the twentieth century, women have become the judges, doctors, lawyers, and artists, while men are kept in complete subordination, taught to cultivate their beauty in order to be chosen in marriage by successful matrons. The heroine of the novel is a liberal politician, taking up the cause of the subjection of men and pleading eloquently in Parliament that "there is more in life for a man than to work, to dig, to

carry out orders, to be a good athlete, an obedient husband, and a conscientious father."

The author of *The Revolt of Man* was Walter Besant, an active clubman, journalist, novelist, and founder of the Society of Authors. A staunch antifeminist, Besant brings to the foreground two revealing anxieties about a female-dominated society. His first anxieties are Oedipal: he fears that in a reversal of the Victorian marriage market, young men will be forced to marry women old enough to be their mothers. Much of the novel deals with the terrifying specter of "toothless hoary old women" claiming young men in marriage, and the slogan of the revolutionary movement is "Young men for young wives!" Besant's other anxieties are professional. He mocks the sexual reversals and absurd conventions the art of a feminist or matriarchal society would create. Portraits of women show them "represented with all the emblems of authority—tables, thrones, papers, deeds and pens," while men "were painted in early manhood" and their "hair was always curly." Paintings at the Royal Academy depict "lovely creamy faces of male youth," or "full-length figures of athletes, runners, wrestlers, jumpers, rowers and cricket-players." One self-taught male artist secretly submits a rugged painting of an old man, but he is caught, his pictures are burned, and he goes mad. Literature consists of romantic and uplifting ballads written by women to indoctrinate men: "The Hero of the Cricket Field" or Lady Longspin's "Vision of the Perfect Knight," "Hymns for Men," or "The Womanhood of Heaven: or, the Light and Hope of Men." In the theater, the feminist society prides itself on having perfected the drama by prohibiting farce, consigning tragedy to oblivion, suppressing ballet, and pronouncing laughter vulgar. The New Drama is "severe and even austere."

Besant's primary message is that women "cannot create . . . at no time has any woman enriched her world with a new idea, a new truth, a new discovery, a new invention" or "composed great music." But rather than claiming responsibility for these sentiments himself, he puts his diatribe against female creativity in the mouth of an elderly woman professor of Ancient and Modern History at Cambridge, Dorothy Ingleby. It is she who urges the young men to restore knowledge "by giving back the university to the sex which can enlarge our bounds." "The sun is masculine—he creates," Professor Ingleby lectures. "The moon is feminine—she only reflects."

We might read the novel as a sharply satiric critique of sexism which works by reversing the roles; but it did not seem to occur to Besant

that women resented their stereotyped representation in art and their exclusion from the professions just as much as men would. Besant could only imagine a society of complementary roles, of dominance and subordination; and his intention is not to expose the stagnation of male art, education, politics and culture but indeed to warn against their infiltration by women. Taking all his examples of what a sexually oppressive society would be like from the Victorian subordination of women, he writes entirely without irony of a future in which men must band together in revolt to reestablish patriarchal dominance and an androcentric religion. The revolt of men chillingly reinstates religious fundamentalism: "There was a general burning of silly books and bad pictures; and they began to open the churches for the new worship, and more and more the image of the Divine Man filled women's hearts." After the male rebellion, women are firmly put in their post-feminist places, places they actually prefer:

No more reading for professions! Hurrah! Did any girl ever really like reading the law? No more drudgery in an office! Very well . . . no anxiety about study, examinations, and a profession . . . unlimited time to look after dress and matters of real importance. . . . Then was born again that sweet feminine gift of coquetry.

Besant was proud of the reception of his book: "*The Revolt of Man* I brought out anonymously. It shows the world turned upside down. Women rule everything and do the whole of the intellectual work; the Perfect Woman is worshipped instead of the Perfect Man. The reception of the book was at first extremely cold; none of the reviews noticed it except slightly; it seemed as if it was going to fail absolutely. Then an article in the *Saturday Review*, written in absolute ignorance of the authorship, started all the papers. I sent for my friend the editor to lunch with me, and confessed the truth. When I say that the advanced woman has never ceased to abuse the book and the author, its success will be understood."<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, it has been the indignation and abuse of feminist readers that has enabled mean-spirited books like *The Revolt of Man* to outlive their historical moments, while feminist satires have been forgotten. Fin-de-siècle women writers did not write feminist "revenge scenarios" comparable to Besant's in which men are enslaved and exploited.<sup>14</sup> There were, however, a range of feminist texts that imagined women victorious. For an opposite view that uses the same concepts and



metaphors as Besant, but to a very different purpose, we might turn to Mary Cholmondeley's futuristic play *Votes for Men* (1909). While Besant uses a fantasy of role reversal to play on men's fears, Cholmondeley uses it to make a case for women's suffrage by showing men how they would feel if they were treated as the subordinate sex. In her fantasy, New Women have won the vote, used control of the birthrate to take control of the government, and disenfranchised men. The young Prime Minister Eugenia argues patiently with her husband Harry who wants to join the Men's Re-franchisement League; she raises the issue of male hysteria and the "brawling brotherhood"; she deplores the caricatures of male suffragists in *Punchinella*; she sympathizes with the problems of surplus men who cannot find wives; and she worries with him about male powerlessness in general. All of these details reverse aspects of women's situation and its masculine representations. But even in writing a propaganda play for the suffrage movement, Cholmondeley cannot repress her own dark self-critical speculations on power. Her female Prime Minister is more empathetic and generous than Gladstone, but she holds on to power just the same. As Harry sadly remarks, "Those who have the upper hand cannot be just to those who are in their power. They don't intend to be unfair, but they seem unable to give their attention to the rights of those who cannot enforce them." Thus, in the end, Harry gives in to Eugenia's pleading and goes off to become President of the Anti-Suffrage League, having fully internalized the psychology of the colonized.

Feminist views of the New Woman also came from such writers as Mona Caird, who adopted the satirical techniques of Besant and other Clublanders in order to demonstrate the absurdity of sexual roles. In 1899, Caird wrote an essay for a symposium in *The Ladies' Realm* on the topic "Does Marriage Hinder a Woman's Self-Development?" Rather than arguing the case, she demonstrated it in a witty role-reversal, asking how a man's self-development and career "would fare in the position, say, of his own wife." John Brown is devoted to his family and to his housekeeping chores; but sometimes "he wonders, in dismay, if he were a true man." As a young unmarried man, he cherished "a passion for scientific research," but his experiments did not go well, and his father "pointed out how selfish it was for a young fellow to indulge his own little fads, when he might make himself useful in a nice manly way, at home." Meanwhile, when his sister Josephine "showed a languid interest in chemistry," the family rushed

to support her, fitted up a spare room as a laboratory, and cheerfully endured mess and explosions. "John, who knows in his heart of hearts that he could have walked round Josephine in the old days, now speaks with manly pride of his sister, the Professor." She has an "awestruck" family and husband, who protect her from worry and interruptions; he has to snatch a few moments of spare time from the household for his research, and worries that "a man's constitution was not fitted for severe brain-work." When he has an idea, his wife gently mocks it; and he grows faded and old, hoping vaguely "that presently, by some different arrangement, some better management on his part, he would achieve leisure and mental repose to do the work that his heart was in."<sup>15</sup>

In the enormous number of feminist utopian writings that proliferated in the *fin de siècle*, women did speculate about a future world of sexual equality. As Anne Mellor comments, "feminist theory is essentially utopian."<sup>16</sup> But the women's utopias are egalitarian and much more concerned with practical matters, with the division of labor and the care of children, than with anarchy, revolt, or matriarchal rule. Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore, or a Socialist Home* (1885), for example, set out minute details of the regulation of a communal home in which men and women would share the housework. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's various utopian writings examined the possibilities for social systems that would free women from drudgery and give them control of their bodies.

The dominant sexual discourse among New Women, as among other late-nineteenth-century feminists, reproduced and intensified stereotypes of female sexlessness and purity. Some New Women writers applied the terminology of Darwinian science to the study of male sexuality and discovered biological sins that could lead to general retrogression. "Man in any age or country is liable to revert to a state of savagery," wrote Mona Caird. Henrietta Müller argued that "male hypersexuality" and female self-restraint would eventually lead to a society in which women reigned.<sup>17</sup> Taking to heart Darwinian arguments about women's self-sacrifice for the good of the species, and sustained by the Victorian belief in women's passionlessness, many New Women envisioned themselves as chaste yet maternal heralds of a higher race. In their stories, female sexuality is purged, projected, or transcended through activism.

But a small group of New Women were also beginning to speak out for the reality and importance of female sexuality. In the United

States, the free-lover Victoria Woodhull and the married-women's-rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke out in behalf of the naturalness of female sexual desire. In England Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx, among others, did research on female sexuality, discussed their own experiences together and with sexologists like Havelock Ellis, and championed a future of mutual desire. By the turn of the century, Stella Browne and other feminist contributors to the *Freewoman* argued for sexual liberation along with women's legal emancipation: "Let us admit our joy and gratitude for the beauty and pleasure of sex," wrote Stella Browne in *The Freewoman* in 1912. "It will be an unspeakable catastrophe if our richly complex feminist movement with its possibilities of power and joy, falls under the domination of sexually deficient or disappointed women, impervious to facts and logic and deeply ignorant about life."

The most advanced male thinking about New Womanhood came from those late-Victorian radicals who had developed socialist, feminist, or utopian critiques of marriage. Britain's first socialist party, the Democratic Federation, was founded in 1881, and the spread of socialist ideas and massive growth in trade union membership led to the formation of the Independent Labour Party in 1892. But British socialism in the 1880s was far from coherent in its ideology. It included intellectuals and artists, like H. G. Wells and Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who founded the Fabian Society in 1884; the counterculture protest of sexual radicals like Edward Carpenter and the Fellowship of the New Life; and the Socialist League of Karl Marx, Edward Aveling, and Frederick Engels. Each of these groups developed its own position on the woman question, the marriage question, and sexuality.

The Marxists saw women's opposition as a byproduct of capitalism that would disappear when women had equal rights as workers. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Engels declared that "the supremacy of the man in marriage is the simple consequence of his economic supremacy, and with the abolition of the latter will disappear of itself." After the overthrow of capitalism, Engels believed, there would be a new generation of free men and women who would make their own sexual rules: "a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money . . . a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love . . . When these people are in the world, they

will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice . . . and that will be the end of it." Similarly, in *The Woman Question* (1886), Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling argued that in a socialist state, in which private property would have been abolished and women would enjoy the same educational and vocational opportunities as men, "monogamy will gain the day. There are approximately equal numbers of men and women, and the highest ideal seems to be the complete, harmonious, lasting blending of two human lives. Such an ideal, almost never attainable today, needs at least four things. These are love, respect, intellectual likeness, and command of the necessities of life." In such a society, there would be no need for either divorce or prostitution.<sup>18</sup>

While some activists, such as Robert Blatchford, believed that all their energy should go into "the accomplishment of the industrial change" and that "the time is not ripe for socialists, as socialists, to meddle with the sexual question,"<sup>19</sup> the sexual radicals, such as the homosexual theorist Edward Carpenter, shared a socialist perspective but placed much more importance on freedom of sexual expression. Carpenter saw the personal and the political as inseparable and believed that sexuality could be the basis of social change. The feminist movement, which he strongly supported, represented a model of sexual politics that he hoped would be followed by a movement for the emancipation of homosexuals.

The most significant debates on the question of sexuality took place in the Men and Women's Club, an organization that met in London from 1885 to 1889. Founded by Karl Pearson, a young Darwinist and socialist instructor of mathematics at University College, it brought together twenty middle-class feminist and socialist intellectuals to discuss everything from Buddhist nuns to contemporary marriage. The male members of the Club, primarily Cambridge friends of Pearson's, were university-educated professionals who were trying to develop a new scientific language for human relationships based on Darwinian and eugenic thought. The female members were mainly reformers and philanthropists. All except two of them were single. Only Henrietta Müller, a militant feminist and "man-hater," had been university-educated. They were earnestly debating a "new sexuality." They were "exploring sexual possibilities . . . and searching for a new language of desire," trying to construct "new narrative forms that would encompass complex thought and feeling."<sup>20</sup>

The most distinguished member of the women's group was the South

African novelist and essayist Olive Schreiner, one of the visionaries of her generation. With the publication of her novel *The Story of a South African Farm* in 1883, Schreiner had become a celebrity. Gladstone sent his compliments; George Moore and Oscar Wilde were eager to meet her; Rider Haggard found her novel, along with those of Stevenson, to be among the most meaningful of the age; the young aesthete Ernest Dowson annotated his copy in private homage to Schreiner's realism; and socialist radicals greeted her as one of their own. *African Farm*, according to Gilbert and Gubar, "through its prototypical portrait of the New Woman . . . helped to establish both the intellectual basis and the rhetorical tropes of turn-of-the-century feminism."<sup>21</sup> In her lifelong commitment to the woman question, Schreiner anticipated and inspired many of the feminist ideas of the twentieth century; her book *Woman and Labor* (1911) was among the first efforts to work out the relationship between feminism and capitalism. Her utopian vision of sexual love allowed for complete spiritual, intellectual, and physical expression for both women and men. She was appalled by Henrietta Müller, the most militant woman in the Club, who "thinks we will have to rule over men in the future as they have ruled and trodden on us in the past."<sup>22</sup> Her pacifism and her views on the racial problem in South Africa also placed her ahead of her time.

Despite Schreiner's efforts, however, the quasi-scientific discourse of the male radicals, echoing concepts of late Victorian "sexual science," both intimidated the women members and made it harder for them to overcome their inhibitions and begin to discuss their own sexuality. Emma Brooke protested against the "distinctly dominant tone" Pearson took in talking to women, and Henrietta Müller eventually resigned, explaining angrily to Pearson that it was "the same old story of the man laying down the law to the woman and not caring to recognize that she has a voice, and the woman resenting in silence, and submitting in silence."<sup>23</sup> In 1889, unable to reach a common position, the Men and Women's Club broke up, not only because of feminist resistance, but also because, as Judith Walkowitz has shown, "men were dissatisfied with the women's performance" and with their resistance to the language of scientific reason.

Moreover, the men saw the sexual revolution only in terms of heterosexuality and women's roles. They could only focus on "woman" as the problem in modern sexuality and had no vocabulary in which to discuss masculine subjectivity. "You have studied and thought out

so deeply the position of woman," Schreiner reproached Pearson; "Why have you not given the same thought to man?"<sup>24</sup> Pearson's paper on "The Woman Question" was all very well, but as Schreiner pointed out, it assumed that one could understand sexuality by discussing "woman, her objects, her needs, her mental and physical nature, and man only in as far as he throws light upon her question. This is entirely wrong."<sup>25</sup> In *The Morality of Marriage*, Mona Caird pointed out that men, too, needed to change: "Nature has indicated fatherhood to man as much as she has indicated motherhood to woman, and it is really difficult to see why a father should not be expected to devote himself wholly to domestic care; that is, if we are so very determined that one sex or the other should be sacrificed EN MASSE."<sup>26</sup>

While men were focusing on the Woman Question, women raised the Man Question. Was the age producing a New Man, the companion who would share their lives and who would evolve by their side? Schreiner was optimistic about the idea that a New Man was emerging to join the New Woman and that together they would create an ideal society. "Side by side with the New Woman," she wrote, ". . . stands the New Man, anxious to possess her on the terms she offers."<sup>27</sup> Much utopian New Women fiction, from Sarah Grand to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was about the vision of the New Man, often an artist or a writer. In George Egerton's "The Regeneration of Two," the heroine establishes a free marriage with a poet. In Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book*, Beth MacLure meets and cares for an invalid artist: "It was all as congenial as it was new to her, this close association with a man of the highest character and the most perfect refinement. She had never before realized that there could be such men, so heroic in suffering, so unselfish, and so good."

In reality, however, men and women were widely separated on many issues. New Women did not think that they could depend on men for political and emotional support. "I really cannot stand this perpetual boasting on the part of men as to how much they have done for us," Elizabeth Wolstoneholme Elmy wrote to a friend in 1893, "when I know with what terrible difficulty each little bit has been extracted from them—always excepting the few brave, noble, generous men—helpers for whom no words of praise are enough."<sup>28</sup> Many of the conflicts between the positions of New Men and New Women surfaced around the issue of the free sexual union. Men who thought about the future of sexual relations under socialism assumed that economic dependency was the chief, if not the only, obstacle to women

giving up the legal protection of marriage. Karl Pearson wrote enthusiastically about its possibilities in 1887: "I hold that the sex-relationship, both as to form and substance, ought to be a pure question of taste, a simple matter of agreement between the man and [the woman] in which neither society nor the state would have any need or right to interfere. The economic independence of both man and woman would render it a relation solely of mutual sympathy and affection; its form and duration would vary according to the feelings and wants of individuals. This free sexual union seems to me the ideal of the future, the outcome of Socialism as applied to sex."<sup>29</sup>

But the socialist ideal of the free sexual union assumed that men and women had equal stakes in the relationship, whereas the undressed problem of the legitimacy and care of children put women at much greater risk of abandonment. Women had more to lose in compromising their sexual reputation than men did. Schreiner could not even receive calls from professional colleagues like Rider Haggard without her landlady bursting in with suspicious questions.<sup>30</sup> A sexual relationship, whether legal or free, meant pregnancy for the woman. Contraception was strictly controlled by doctors (who themselves had the smallest families among professionals), despite the beginnings of a secular birth-control movement. And even more important, the rational ideal ignored or wished away emotional issues of fidelity, jealousy, and insecurity. In the sexual utopia after socialism, both Pearson and Carpenter would argue, jealousy and heartbreak would not exist. Where there was no possession and no commitment, there could be no betrayal and no loss. In his thinking about the "form and duration" of the free sexual union, Pearson seemed to have assumed that it would end as it had begun, by "mutual" consent, and not because one partner would stop loving first.

Women took a more pessimistic view of the potential damage of abandonment. Olive Schreiner had developed many of her own ideas in her correspondence with Pearson. "The most ideal marriage at the present day," she wrote in 1886, "seems to me to be the union of two individuals, strongly sympathetic, who after deep thought enter in the sexual relationship. There should be no bond or promise between them; for the sake of children a legal contract should be, I think, formed. The less said about love and life-long continuance together the better . . . The union will be, as long as each one feels they are expanding or aiding the other's life."<sup>31</sup> But when she talked to women suffering

from the pain of abandonment, Schreiner felt that the concept of free love was a "devilish thing" that had to be modified.

The gender divisions around the issue of the free sexual union were central to Gissing's plot in *The Odd Women*. The struggle between Everard and Rhoda is symbolized by his wish to make her accept a "free union" rather than marriage, and her insistence on a full legal commitment. Barfoot proposes to Rhoda that she should honor her radical principles by living with him, as those people who "have thrown away prejudice and superstition" dare to do. Rhoda's initial response is skeptical: "This particular reform doesn't seem very practical. It is trying to bring about an ideal state of things whilst we are struggling with elementary obstacles." Even the most cynical female roué in the novel, a society widow who seems to have come from a Wilde play, regards the free union as a reform to be undertaken only by prominent men and women who are willing to martyr themselves for the sake of others. Furthermore, children are the repressed element in Everard's lofty rhetoric of freedom and trust. Rhoda has good reason to worry whether he will feel a sense of responsibility for a child; there had been a scandal in his past when he had gotten a shopgirl pregnant and then refused to marry her; he calls the baby "her child" and smiles when he tells a friend that it died. In his first long conversation with Rhoda, he tells her that he would never stay in an unhappy marriage for the children's sake; later he decides that he does not want children and assumes that Rhoda shares his attitude, although he never asks her about it. Eventually he decides to keep marriage in reserve, in case, as he thinks in characteristically uninvolved language, Rhoda "became a mother." But the more acute issue Gissing dramatizes is Rhoda's realization that, despite her principles, she is subject to agonizing jealousy and despair, at times so devastating that she thinks "if she could not crush out her love for this man she would poison herself."

A more simplistic but equally controversial fin-de-siècle novel about the free union was Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895). Allen was a prolific writer and moralist whose self-righteous social concerns led one critic to dub him "the Darwinian St. Paul."<sup>32</sup> His heroine Hermione Barton is a Girton student who is ideologically opposed to marriage: "I am not and never could be slave to any man." She "can never quite forgive George Eliot—who knew the truth, and found freedom for herself, and practised it in her life—for upholding in her

books the conventional lies, the conventional prejudices." Thus she decides to live in a free union with her lover Alan Merrick, but not to marry him, even when she becomes pregnant. However, he dies of typhus and leaves her unprovided; his family rejects her; and she returns to London with her baby, calling herself "Mrs. Barton," to face a hard lifetime struggle doing literary hackwork. Hermione's one dream is that her daughter, Dolores, will be the really free woman, the feminist messiah of the new generation, who will "regenerate humanity." Yet Dolores turns out to be a throwback, a thoroughly conventional girl, ashamed of her mother's position and horrified when she discovers her own illegitimacy. When it becomes clear that her notoriety stands in the way of her daughter's marriage, Hermoine takes prussic acid.

While it became a huge best-seller and affected public stereotypes of the sexually rebellious New Woman, *The Woman Who Did* was never popular with feminists and their supporters. H. G. Wells protested that Allen was attacking the wrong institutions: "He does not propose to emancipate them from the narrowness, the sexual savagery, the want of charity, that are the sole causes of the miseries of the illegitimate and the unfortunate. Instead he wishes to emancipate them from monogamy, which we have hitherto regarded as being more of a fetter upon virile instincts."<sup>33</sup> The suffragist leader Millicent Fawcett denounced Allen as one who had never helped women in any practical sense and who was now "not a friend but an enemy" who "endeavors to link together the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence, with attacks upon marriage and the family."<sup>34</sup> The novelist Sarah Grand believed that the story clearly showed "that women have nothing to gain and everything to lose by renouncing the protection which legal marriage gives."<sup>35</sup> Novelists responded to it in the form of *The Woman Who Didn't* (1895), by Victoria Crosse, and *The Woman Who Wouldn't*, by Lucas Cleeve.

Both men and women were ambivalent about the sexual questions they attempted to discuss in a rational and scientific mode. Like many "New Men" of the 1880s, as Judith Walkowitz points out, Karl Pearson was both critical of patriarchy and frightened by feminism; he might champion "the sexual choices of the advanced New Woman in the abstract," but he was "terrified by and disorientated by any signs of female sexual agency in the flesh."<sup>36</sup> When Pearson himself fell in love, he quickly opted for conventional marriage instead of a free sexual union. And both Allen, in *The Woman Who Did*, and Gissing,

in *The Odd Women*, acknowledged that the idealistic New Women who tried to live by the rationalist rhetoric of socialist feminism and the free union often found themselves in positions of extraordinary personal risk, overwhelmed by feelings of loss, betrayal, jealousy, or possessiveness they had denied or judged irrational.

Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx, were two of the New Women of this transitional generation who made the effort to live by their beliefs. Both were idealists caught up in the most radical political and social transformations of the time, living at the frontiers of socialist, feminist, and anticolonialist struggle. Close friends from the time they first met in 1882, Schreiner and Marx shared a vision of sexual equality, camaraderie, and fidelity between women and men. Marx wrote a purely rationalist discourse on sex, Schreiner a lyrical and utopian one; but both denied and suppressed women's anxieties about sexual pleasure, power, and danger that persisted in spite of socialist and scientific rhetoric. Both suffered most of their lives from crippling psychosomatic diseases and nervous symptoms like those of the hysterical women Freud and Breuer were treating in Vienna; Marx eventually committed suicide. Thus, for all their greatness, both were tragic feminist intellectuals of the *fin de siècle* whose lives revealed the huge gap between socialist-feminist theory and the realities of women's lives.

Eleanor Marx was, of course, the daughter of the revolution, whose "feminism was inseparable from her socialism."<sup>37</sup> In 1886, she delivered a passionate speech commemorating the Paris Commune: "When the revolution comes—and it *must* come—it will be by the workers, without distinction of sex or trade or country, standing and fighting shoulder to shoulder."<sup>38</sup> She had seemed to lead an exemplary political and personal life, acting Nora in *A Doll's House*, translating *Madame Bovary*, and touring the United States in 1886–87 during one of the formative periods of the American labor movement.

Yet Marx also felt the conflict between political ideals, social realities, and sexual desires. In 1881, Dr. Bryan Donkin had treated her for anorexia, trembling and convulsive spells, as well as depression and exhaustion. He had attributed these hysterical symptoms to the strain of nursing her parents and also to sexual repression. In 1882, when Schreiner and Marx met in London and became friends, they shared an interest in discussing female sexuality and had talked, for example, about the influence of the menstrual cycle on sexual excitement.<sup>39</sup> But in 1884, when she was twenty-nine, Marx had joined

her life to the critic Edward Aveling in a free union, since his wife would not give him a divorce. "We have both felt that we were justified in setting aside all the false and really immoral bourgeois conventionalities," she wrote to a Marxist friend, "and I am happy to say we have received the only thing we really care about—the approbation of our friends and fellow-socialists." When Donkin invited her to join the Men and Women's Club, Marx declined, viewing herself as more sexually radical than the other women members: "It is a very different matter to advocate certain things in theory, and to have the courage to put one's theories into practice; probably many of the good ladies in the Club would be much shocked at the idea of my becoming a member of it."<sup>40</sup>

Marx and Aveling made their union the model for a future of free men and women, and intellectuals such as Karl Pearson applauded their relationship as a glorious example of "the direction [in which] marriage ought to go."<sup>41</sup> In *The Woman Question*, Marx and Aveling expressed their faith in monogamy: "We believe that the cleaving of one man to one woman will be best for all." They explained their confidence that in a socialist state "the two great curses that . . . ruin the relation between man and woman would have passed": unequal treatment of the sexes and dishonesty. No longer, they proclaimed, "will there be the hideous disguise, the constant lying, that makes the domestic life of almost all our English homes an organised hypocrisy." Indeed, in the socialist future, husband and wife would be able to "look clear through one another's eyes into one another's hearts."<sup>42</sup> Yet Edward Aveling was one of the most notorious liars and philanderers in London, a total hypocrite who secretly married a much younger woman in 1897. In March 1898, having discovered Aveling's infidelity, Marx killed herself by taking prussic acid, dying like Emma Bovary or the Woman Who Did. She was only forty-three. Many believed that she and Aveling had shared a suicide pact which only she had honored.

"It is such a mercy she has escaped from him," Olive Schreiner wrote to a friend upon hearing of Eleanor's death.<sup>43</sup> Schreiner had long intuitively despised Aveling; as she wrote to Havelock Ellis when the couple started living together, "to say I dislike him doesn't express it at all; I have a fear and horror of him when I am near. Every time I see him the shrinking goes stronger."<sup>44</sup> Yet her insights about Marx did not protect her in her own life. For Schreiner was one of those notable women whose failure seems especially representative of her

generation. She was never able to bring her great literary talents to mature fruition; the book that was meant to be her major work, *From Man to Man*, was never finished, and for long periods she found it impossible to write at all. Despite all her passionate beliefs, she could not work in movements for political change. A series of self-destructive relationships with men in England, including Havelock Ellis and Karl Pearson, forced her to suppress and deny her own sexuality; and she suffered all her life from a series of devastating psychosomatic illnesses. Ellis had prescribed bromides and *nux vomica* for her dizziness, nausea, and crying spells. Bryan Donkin treated her unsuccessfully for asthma attacks and "nerve-storms" that he attributed to the sexual stresses in her life. After Pearson married another woman in the Men and Women's Club, Schreiner returned to South Africa and married a younger man who took her name. But their infant daughter died within a few days of her birth, and the marriage never met her expectations of an intellectual partnership.

These were terrible disappointments to someone whose theoretical and polemical writing dealt so extensively with sexuality. Schreiner believed that the full expression of female sexuality was essential for the development of women, for "something sexual" lay at the "root of all intellectual and artistic achievement."<sup>45</sup> Often expressing her surprise at male doctors' and scientists' ignorance of the most basic facts of women's physiology, she also felt that men were alienated from their own full sexual and human development by stereotypes of masculinity. In letters to Ellis and Pearson, she argued that the paternal instinct was as strong as the maternal one and that human sexuality, freed of some of the pressures for mere survival, was evolving towards the aesthetic and beautiful. As women found themselves able to enter freely into all lines of work, she predicted, they would meet and marry their fellow workers, for the ties of "common interests and . . . common labours" would invariably attract New Women and New Men to each other in "the perfect mental and physical life-long union of one man with one woman."<sup>46</sup>

Like Eleanor Marx, Schreiner felt that feminist anger towards men was an unhappy symptom of oppression rather than an emotion to be encouraged. "We cannot hate any one," she wrote to Karl Pearson. "Man injures woman and woman injures man. It is not a case for crying out against individuals or against sexes, but simply for changing a whole system."<sup>47</sup> As she wrote to Havelock Ellis, Schreiner opposed "anything that divides the two sexes. My main point is this: human



development has now reached a point at which sexual difference has become a thing of altogether minor importance. We make too much of it; we are men and women in the second place, human beings in the first."<sup>48</sup>

In *Woman and Labor* Schreiner attempted to work out her vision of a sexual evolution, rather than a revolution, that would bring men and women closer together. Instead of envisioning feminist *coups d'état* and female dominance, Schreiner hoped that the women's movement could be "called a part of the great movement of the sexes towards each other, a movement towards common occupations, common interests, common ideals, and an emotional tenderness and sympathy between the sexes more deeply founded and more indestructible than any the world has ever seen." In eloquent Darwinian metaphors, she wrote about the sexual utopia that lay beyond the end of prostitution, when both sexes would reach their full evolutionary potential: "Always in our dreams we hear the turn of the key that shall close the door of the last brothel; the clink of the last coin that pays for the body and soul of a woman; the falling of the last wall that encloses artificially the activity of woman and divides her from man; always we picture the love of the sexes as once a dull, slow-creeping worm; then a torpid, earthy chrysalis; at last the full-winged insect, glorious in the sunshine of the future."

Yet despite these large-minded visions, Schreiner came to believe that her generation of feminists had been called upon to sacrifice their sexuality and their opportunities for love in order to secure the future freedom of other women. Until New Men were educated to appreciate the love of free women, the most advanced women would be doomed to celibacy and loneliness. Yet if women had the courage to choose independence and solitude over love, they would help make the way for the future in which women would not have to choose. In her allegory, "Life's Gifts," she summed up the position of the feminist avant-garde: "I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her, and held in each hand a gift—in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, 'Choose!'"

"And the woman waited long; and she said, 'Freedom!'"

"And Life said, 'Thou hast well chosen. If thou hadst said, 'Love,' I would have given thee that thou didst ask for; and I would have gone from thee, and returned to thee no more. Now, the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand.'"

"I heard the woman laugh in her sleep."

Schreiner's fiction thus expressed the bitterness and disillusionment of New Women with men who were not ready to join them in their evolutionary progress. "The Buddhist Priest's Wife," which she wrote during three months in 1892, was Schreiner's personal favorite among her stories of sexual difference. It is "much the best thing I have ever written," she noted; "... the substance of it is that which I have lived all these years to learn, and suffered all that I have suffered to know."<sup>49</sup> Schreiner described the story in an earlier draft to W. T. Stead: "A woman scientific in tendency and habits of thought but intensely emotional loves a brilliant politician; she is going away where she will never see him again, she invites him to see her the last night, they discuss love, the ideal of marriage, prostitution, and the evils of celibacy (which I think are very great, though at the present day for many of the best men and women inevitable)."<sup>50</sup> Based on her own unhappy affair with Karl Pearson, the story, as Schreiner herself reflected upon it, is about "the individual natures of the man and the woman, and their relation to one another, which throws a curious side-light on the whole discussion . . . It ends with the woman asking the man to kiss her, and then she goes suddenly out of the room. For the first time it bursts upon him with a sense of astonishment that she loves him; he waits to hear her return; but she never comes; the next day she leaves for India and they never meet again."<sup>51</sup> Schreiner identifies her characters generically as "the woman" and "the man." Her heroine's New Womanhood is made immediately evident by her London "room of one's own," her silver cigarette case, and her nervous smoking; the man's greater social ease is evident in his evening clothes, his passion for sport, and his "half-amused, half-interested" manner of speaking. The topic of their conversation, the social taboos that prevent women from asserting their feelings and desires, is an ironic counterpart to the subtext of her unexpressed and unrequited love for him. Although he admires her "brilliant parts and attractions" enormously and expects her to be "the most successful woman in London," because of her intellect he cannot love her. And she cannot tell him of her feelings because "the woman who had told a man she loved him would have put between them a barrier once and for ever that could not be crossed."

As in *The Odd Women*, the ending of the story made clear that while the New Man had many choices, the New Woman had only a few. The man goes off cheerfully to seek an American wife who will have the "same aims and tastes" that he has and who will bear him



children and support his political career. The woman goes off, as he jokingly predicts, to "marry some old Buddhist Priest, build a little cottage on the top of the Himalayas and live there, discuss philosophy and meditate." But Buddhist priests do not have wives;<sup>52</sup> in reality, she has gone off to work bravely alone and then to die, perhaps even to commit suicide. "Cover her up! How still it lies!" writes the narrator. "She that had travelled so far, in so many lands, and done so much and seen so much, how she must like rest now! Did she ever love anything absolutely? . . . did she ever need a love she could not have? Was she never obliged to unclasp her fingers from anything to which they clung? Was she really so strong as she looked? Did she never wake up in the night crying for that which she could not have?"

In their splendid biography of Schreiner, the English feminist historian Ann Scott and the late South African radical Ruth First, assassinated by a letter bomb during her exile in Mozambique, asserted the necessity for a total understanding of the woman intellectual as the product of both personal and social forces. In their view, Schreiner's predicament was the sum of her experience with the colonial culture of South Africa, her encounters with English socialism, and her need to reconcile her work as a writer with her emotional and sexual needs. Since she had come from a society that had no native literature, being a woman was only part of her problem of creative expression; Nadine Gordimer has recalled that during her own adolescence in South Africa, "the concept 'intellectual,' gathered from reading, belonged as categorically to the Northern hemisphere as a snowy Christmas."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Doris Lessing, in Rhodesia, and Ruth First (whose tragic story of political activism in South Africa was told in *117 Days*, her memoir of imprisonment and in *A World Apart* [1988], the powerful film her daughter wrote about her life) experienced their sex as only one element in the totality of their political engagements and intellectual aspirations.

Like Eleanor Marx and like other heroic New Women of her generation, Schreiner sometimes derived energy and inspiration from the struggle with her contradictory identities, but more often they interrupted or even paralyzed her creative drives. "In the ideal condition for which we look," Schreiner wrote to Havelock Ellis, "men and women will walk close, hand in hand, but now the fight has oftenest to be fought out alone by both." The day when Life would come to women bearing both freedom and love seemed far in the future.

## FOUR

### Queen George

If sexual anarchy began with the odd woman and the New Woman, textual anarchy might be traced to the death of George Eliot, who had ruled the Victorian novel as Queen Victoria ruled the nation. On a snowy and windy December 29, 1880, Eliot was buried in a splendid funeral at Highgate Cemetery. Among the crowds of mourners following the coffin covered with wreaths of white flowers were such celebrated men of the age as Robert Browning, Herbert Spencer, John Everett Millais, and T. H. Huxley. Although they were unnamed in newspaper accounts, many of Eliot's women friends also attended the funeral; perhaps the most distraught was the writer and trade unionist Edith Simcox, who had worshiped Eliot with single-minded and unrequited love for many years and had taken her as her "muse and her model."<sup>54</sup> Simcox noted in her journal that not all the bystanders understood exactly whose funeral they were witnessing. "Was it the late George Eliot's wife who was going to be buried?" a child asked Simcox, who, overcome with grief and planning to have her own ashes scattered over Eliot's grave, simply answered "Yes."<sup>55</sup>

The confusion over gender roles at Eliot's funeral reflected her anomalous and crucial position in Victorian letters. George Eliot, whose real name was Marian Evans, had played virtually every role of Victorian gender herself. On the feminine side, as one critic observed, "she had created herself first as a daughter, then as a sister, and finally as a mother figure for countless younger men."<sup>56</sup> Yet the male pseudonym, the masculine authority she commanded as a writer, and the range of her intellectual, philosophical, and scientific interests